# *Houston's Little Sisters: A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Offshore Oil*

*by* JANE HURWITZ NADEL

*Jane Hurwitz Nadel is a member of the Faculty of Liberal Studies, Clarkson College, Potsdam, N.Y.* *An earlier version of this paper was presented at the invitation of the Royal Anthropological Institute at the 41st Annual Meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology in Edinburgh, April 1981. For their support of my research in New England, I would like to thank the Marine Policy Programs of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and the National Sea Grant Program (# NA 79AA-D-0012). For their helpful critical comments I thank Larry van Horn, Stan Nadel, Estellie Smith and Krystyna Starker, as well as anonymous reviewers. For their invaluable research assistance, I thank Cathy Weaver and Claire Pedrick, of the University of Rhode Island. And finally I thank the people of Montrose and Ferryden, Scotland, and of North Kingstown, Rhode Island, for their unstinting cooperation.*

Social impact assessment has become a popular activity in recent years. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed an explosion of public concern over the environmental and social consequences of rapid technological change. The United States government reflected this concern for planning in passing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, which stipulated that environmental and socioeconomic impacts be assessed before the implementation of such projects as dam building, offshore drilling, and highway construction. However, as Jorgensen (1981:66–86) has recently pointed out, such studies have tended to be very shallow. (See also Cortese and Jones 1977.) Dixon (1978:258–70) also notes that the models available for such assessments have been woefully limited, often resting on armchair theorizing and untested assumptions. One approach to the assessment problem has been the use of analogies: modeling the effects in one community on the experiences of another. This approach shares many of the deficiencies of another widely criticized change model: modernization theory. Just as modernization theory tends to assume a unilinear development pattern modeled on the rise of capitalism in the West (Nash 1977:17), impact assessment models often are based on similarities that are more superficial than substantial. This approach has particularly characterized discussions of planning for coastal development related to offshore drilling (Allen et al. 1976:56; Baldwin and Baldwin 1975:11; Commerce Committee 1974).

One reason for the inadequacy of such comparisons lies in the underlying assumption that social impacts are restricted to quantifiable issues such as population structure, number of housing units, labor force requirements, and so on (Tippie and Robadue 1978). This approach conveniently ignores the need for more complex and time-consuming investigations into problems of social and political organization—particularly the nature of local power and decision making (Peterson and Gemmell 1981:391). The extent of local community involvement in the offshore industry is presumed to depend on such factors as the overall scale of development, the industry's requirements, and national priorities in the energy quest. This list is valid but incomplete. The interest groups and decision-making abilities of a community are crucial in determining not only the nature and extent of community participation, but also the number and kinds of conflicts which almost invariably accompany development. The lack of attention to real and wide-ranging community differences often results in a wide gap between expectation and outcome. Anthropologists should be especially sensitive to this error of overgeneralization. We have been notably outspoken in criticizing many aid and development programs for failing to take cultural factors and social organization into account (Goodenough 1966: 484–519; Kimball 1978:290; Spicer 1952; Arensberg and Niehoff 1964).[1]

This paper very briefly contrasts a Scottish and a New England experience with offshore oil development. It demonstrates some of the problems in using the former as a planning model for the latter. This analysis is based on my fieldwork in both regions: in eastern Scotland in 1975 and 1976, and in Rhode Island from 1978 through the first half of 1980. In both places I used standard anthropological techniques of participant-observation and intensive interviewing, supplemented by extensive use of archival material to help establish the historical dimensions so essential to understanding the modern situation. In both places, my research goals were to uncover information that would help me to understand the local political aspects of rapid exogenous industrial change. Thus, I was not "doing SIA" (social impact assessment) for a client; I was free to choose my areas of investigation and I was not under serious time constraints (see Feldman 1981:223–37 for a discussion of problems in contract work). The task of trying to make comparisons between my two research areas convinced me that social impact assessment research can be made much more powerful with a truly holistic framework, and that only within such a framework can we continue to maintain the essential unity of applied and theoretical anthropology on which Mair (1969:3) rightly insists. (See also Bowles 1981:35–39.)

Exploration off the northeastern coast of the United States is still in its infancy, but New England's coastal states have expressed great concern over the offshore and onshore consequences of drilling. Some of their anxiety stems from a general unfamiliarity with the industry and a fear that offshore development will transform coastal communities beyond recognition. Government, business, and community leaders and planners have eagerly turned to Scotland as a guide to the future. Faced with a culturally and technologically foreign industry conceived off the swampy coast of Louisiana, New Englanders have sought instruction from another northern region which appears to offer useful parallels. The Baldwins endorse that approach in the introduction to their book *Onshore Planning for Offshore Oil: Lessons from Scotland* (1975:11) when they suggest that even New England's social structure bears a closer resemblance to that of the Scottish North Sea coast than it does to the Gulf communities of Texas and Louisiana. However, the Baldwins appear to take a rather mechanical and limited view of social structure, referring mainly to such factors as community size, density, and infrastructure.

It is true that there are a number of points of similarity between Scotland and New England with respect to offshore development. In contrast to the warm and shallow waters of the Gulf, the Northeast Atlantic requires recently developed

deep-water drilling technology, much of it designed for the North Sea. Rather than the long, slow buildup of the oil industry along the southern coasts of its infancy, New England may feel the effects of rapid development. And unlike the virtually uncontrolled expansion of the offshore industry in the Gulf, New England, like Scotland, will impose restrictions on facility siting to protect existing community interests. However, many aspects of oil development impact are constrained by particular planning frameworks and by the structure and power of local and regional interest groups. To illustrate some pertinent differences in the social organization of power between communities on the Scottish and New England coasts, I will summarize oil-related developments in a Scottish and in a New England town, focusing on comparable issues of competition for domain.

Montrose is an old mercantile town of about 11,000 people that lies on the east coast of Scotland, midway between the cities of Aberdeen and Dundee. Throughout its history, its merchants have prided themselves on their acumen, their aggressiveness, and their ability to dominate the surrounding hinterland of farms and fishing villages without interference from their larger urban neighbors. Montrose's merchants enjoyed an extensive trade with Baltic, Low Country, and Mediterranean ports as early as the 14th century, and by the 18th century they had begun to intermarry with local landowning families. They thus formed a tightly knit local elite group that showed remarkable stability and persistence. Members of this elite controlled the region's productive resources and dominated key decision-making bodies, such as the town council and the harbor board. The town's fortunes peaked in the late 19th century; its prosperity waned slowly and steadily through the inter-War period. By the 1960s, activity at the port was at a low ebb. Still, many independent local businesses survived as heirs of the 19th-century merchant elite.

Since 1834, the Montrose Harbour Board of Trustees has held (by virtue of a parliamentary charter) unlimited authority over all harbor-related matters. It is a self-perpetuating body that traditionally recruits most of its members from the elite described above. It pays annual fixed dues to the town and is subject to an outside audit, but within its domain, it is answerable only to the British Parliament. The harbor board and its members hold a great deal of power over the lifeblood of the town, that is, the port.

Representatives of the town's major commercial enterprises, today's harbor board members form a powerful clique, a core group of men linked by ties of class, kinship, friendship, clientship, and economic cooperation. Most of them play many important local roles, including the leadership of local and district government, civil administration, Rotary and Round Table organizations, chamber of commerce, charitable institutions, and the local newspaper. Their interests, activities, and degree of power all depend on the maintenance of Montrose as a regional center (Smith 1976:7) rather than as the satellite of a larger and more powerful neighbor. The board has been well aware of the potential danger of outside domination of a new and unfamiliar economic resource and therefore took an aggressive approach to the management of North Sea oil business within its boundaries. Strategic information about land and other properties, development proposals, and planning problems was restricted to a few key individuals who were linked together by a particular board member who acted as a go-between, or broker. What the board and its allies hoped to do (and largely succeeded in doing) was to use outside high-level corporate resources to form an alliance against potential regional competitors from Aberdeen, Dundee, and other Scottish towns (Nadel 1980).

By the early 1970s it was clear that Aberdeen, Montrose's northern neighbor (called the "Houston of Scotland") could no longer contain the North Sea oil boom. The offshore supply industry began to reach outward to less crowded and less expensive east coast ports. In 1972, the Montrose Harbour Board agreed to establish an offshore supply base in partnership with the Sea Oil Services Company (SOS), a subsidiary of the multinational Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation (P&O). Although no suitable site was available near the existing docks, the board decided to use what it saw as underutilized space—the tidal stream that ran along the south-facing shore abutting the small village of Ferryden. The board secured a government loan to dredge the harbor and used the dredged material to create 37 acres of landfill in front of the village. The site was leased to SOS, which became sole manager of a base designed to service five offshore rigs. SOS agreed to pay the harbor board an annual rent sufficient to meet the board's loan payments and further agreed to relinquish the base to the harbor board when it was ready to depart. (In keeping with Montrose's history of independence, the harbor manager dreams of turning the base into a major container port.)

However, in the haste to establish offshore oil as a resource under local control, the Montrose Harbour Board encountered an obstacle which, for a time, appeared to threaten all its hopes of maritime revival. Although the dock gates clearly mark harbor from town domain, the harbor board authority on the far or village side of the harbor was ambiguous. In order to construct quays along the edge of the new oil base site, the board was therefore required to seek a special permission from Parliament in the form of a harbor revision order. Despite intensive lobbying efforts on the part of the board's solicitor, however, the order was not immediately forthcoming. (Rumor has it that the city of Dundee, 30 miles to the south, was also lobbying intensively to kill the Montrose project and divert it to Dundee, but this has not been substantiated.)

Then an officer of a salmon fishing company (whose fishing rights in the river had allegedly been damaged by the dredging) claimed to have seen the disputed quays already under construction—before Parliament granted permission. The board denied this, saying the site merely contained sheet pilings required to protect it from erosion, but a public inquiry in Aberdeen by parliamentary investigators found the board guilty and rebuked it for offering "misleading statements." Work was ordered stopped until the revision order should come through. Despite the mild scandal and the halt in construction, work on the base was finished in time to satisfy the urgent demands of P&O. For this powerful multinational, all delays meant loss of money and they had threatened to pull out and go elsewhere if the schedule were not kept. The harbor board was ultimately accorded the lion's share of the glory for turning the town into what a local author called "an east coast oil town" (Fraser 1974).

The base was fully operational by 1974. At any given time, 20 to 30 companies could be found in residence and the full-

time work force rose above 400. Other offshore support companies established construction and training centers in other parts of the town. The local press (whose editor was a member of the harbor board and a key member of its oil liaison committee) sang the praises of the new industry. Bars, hotels, and restaurants flourished. Trade at the commercial (non-oil) docks increased. Local farmers, builders' suppliers, and fish merchants (members of the board-centered clique) formed new companies to supply the offshore market with food, housing, transport ("rope, soap, and dope") and even oil field lubricants. Using their firm control over land, local production, and information, the Montrose business elite prevented established Scottish offshore support companies in Aberdeen from moving in and setting up branch offices.

The primary decision makers in oil developments in Montrose remained the harbor board and P&O. Others involved, including the Department of Environment, the Angus County Planning Authority, and a variety of private objectors, were relegated to a secondary level with little direct input, and they exercised little real power. (See Nadel 1979, for a more detailed discussion.) The SOS base development thus represents a mutually profitable alliance between a local small-town elite and an English-based multinational corporation.

The situation was very different in the middle-sized New England township that has become the primary support area for drilling activities off the New England and mid-Atlantic coasts of the United States. North Kingstown, Rhode Island, is a community in the throes of rapid change over which it has had little to say. While offshore oil has as yet played only a limited role, it is symbolic of local powerlessness in a contest between the town and the state of Rhode Island for control over local development.

North Kingstown has a population of approximately 22,000 and is situated on the western shore of Narragansett Bay, 20 miles from the state capital at Providence. While the inner circle of towns surrounding Providence has become irretrievably suburban, North Kingstown has always considered itself part of rural "South County," a historically Yankee-dominated farm and small business hinterland of Rhode Island.[2] Rhode Island is often characterized as a densely populated, heavily industrialized "city-state" (Lockhardt 1959:183), but the towns of South County have maintained a different identity. The mythical ethnic symbol of South County is the Swamp Yankee, locally described as an Anglo-Saxon descendant of the Great Swamp Fight of the Revolutionary War, a crusty and xenophobic individualist to whom private property is sacred and state interference and urban culture are anathema.

Many of North Kingstown's residents (few of whom are, in fact, Swamp Yankees) view the capital city and its resident state agencies as enemies of their way of life. The Providence region is dominated by Irish and Italian Roman Catholics and by Democratic Party interests. Providence bears the stigmata of urban strife and alienation. Labor unions, much loathed by many North Kingstown businesses,[3] are seen as stretching greedy tentacles from the capital. Big-city machine politics and what is perceived as the general corruption of urban life are contrasted sharply with North Kingstown's idealized self-image of rural peace, Yankee individualism, and the face-to-face community.

The subsistence base of North Kingstown and its environs underwent several transformations before World War II, from fishing and farming through textiles. Once a prosperous seaport, the central village of Wickford was reduced to a rural backwater as the city of Providence grew to become the effective "central place" (Smith 1976:7) of the Rhode Island region, and as the textile industry began its flight to the south. The depression of the 1930s hit hard.

World War II brought drastic changes. In 1938, the federal government bought over 3,000 acres of prime agricultural land in the coastal Quonset Point and Davisville sections of the town for a naval air station and construction battalion. The navy found the deep-water harbor site so useful that it stayed on after the war was over, becoming a major element in the town's social and economic life. Between 1940 and 1970, the town's population rose from 4,000 to nearly 30,000. Schools, roads, and houses were built to accommodate the military wave. In addition to its own personnel, the navy employed over 5,000 civilian workers in North Kingstown alone. It was therefore quite a shock when the navy announced the imminent closure of most of its North Kingstown operations in 1973. The town felt devastated. By 1974, the population had fallen by nearly one-third. The schools built for some 2,000 navy children stood empty and silent. The main commercial thoroughfare resembled an abandoned movie set. The navy "boom" was over, and North Kingstown was left with a greatly enlarged population, little viable industry, and the loss of some of its former community leaders.

North Kingstown was not alone. The entire state of Rhode Island was reeling from the closure of this and other navy installations. (Including the bases at Newport, Middletown, and Portsmouth, the navy was Rhode Island's largest single employer from 1945 to 1973.) Ever since the Great Depression, the state had been trying to attract new industry and diversify its economy, but to little avail. Statewide unemployment remained high. However, new efforts to improve the statewide economic picture threatened the town's rural South County orientation, as it was targeted as a core area for redevelopment. North Kingstown's responses to such efforts have been ambivalent. The town's uneven and disappointing experience with growth has left it wary, particularly of changes controlled from without. In 1974, the state general assembly established an Economic Development Corporation charged with redeveloping the lands "excessed" by the U.S. government. The Quonset Point and Davisville sections of town became the objects of statewide scrutiny (Harbridge House 1976). The Rhode Island Port Authority was assigned to manage the site, and one of its first customers was the Electric Boat Division of General Dynamics. This brought in nearly 3,000 new jobs. A new highway link to Providence soon multiplied the flow of commuters seeking an exurban haven. By 1976, the population had begun to rise again and the pace of housing construction outstripped the capacity of the town planner's office.

By this time, also, national pressure toward energy self-sufficiency (in the wake of OPEC's demands) made the long-rumored prospect of OCS development in the North Atlantic seem increasingly realistic.[4] It was quickly apparent that the huge Quonset/Davisville (Q/D) former navy site, with its unused piers and empty sheds, and its equidistant accessibility to both the Georges Bank and the Baltimore Canyon offshore drilling grounds, was ideally suited to provide the shoreside services the offshore industry required. The Providence press waxed lyrical and dubbed North Kingstown the "Houston" of

Rhode Island. Planners began to draft low, medium, and high-find scenarios to assess the local and statewide potential for growth, although no one was very certain of the form this might take (Coastal Resources Center 1977).

Reaction in North Kingstown to this possibility was mixed (*Standard-Times*, selected editorials; Schneider, n.d.). The town council began to raise questions about the state's commitment to North Kingstown's best interests (one council member complained that town views were not being "taken seriously"), and some members queried the legitimacy of the state's assumption of control over what had been and still was town land. Many townspeople expressed dissatisfaction with North Kingstown's role in planning for its own future, insisting that too much control had passed to outside government. In 1978, the then Republican-dominated town council took a stand for local control of change by issuing a moratorium on land subdivisions for new housing. The move symbolized the growing rift in and realignment of North Kingstown society. Old-time Yankees and recent middle-class residents were joined in their fear that North Kingstown was powerless to control its transformation by urban and industrial growth, generated by the city of Providence, the state Department of Economic Development, and now, by the oil industry. The Council appeared most concerned that town hegemony over town affairs was under fresh attack. In an interview, the Republican chairwoman of the Council spoke enthusiastically about economic revival; at the same time she expressed concern over what she apparently saw as a Democratic Party/chamber of commerce/Providence "understanding" to undermine the council's power and authority and to use the town's resources to meet state and private goals.

Such fears were not quenched in 1979 by a bill sponsored by the Rhode Island Port Authority in the state legislature to eliminate North Kingstown's jurisdiction at Q/D. The bill did not pass, but raised spectres of eventual success. A local legislator expressed the belief that "when town and state interests have been in conflict, the assembly has always sided with the state." Concerned that the town might not even receive adequate information about state plans for offshore oil development at Q/D, the town council appointed the planning committee as its liaison group to advise the state on town needs. One burning issue was the allocation of tax revenues from businesses operating at Q/D. State absorption of these revenues would mean that an important tax base would continue to be lost to town income. Amidst such controversy, the town solicitor negotiated an agreement with the state on the amount of payments the town would receive in lieu of taxes. Despite the settlement, some local residents felt that the town had been sold out by "the politicians" and the denial by a state committee of the town's application for a Coastal Energy Impact Program grant did nothing to change their viewpoint.

The town's experience with offshore oil to date has actually been rather limited because of a combination of exploration delays and disappointing results, but the Quonset/Davisville site has an excellent chance to dominate and perhaps to monopolize New England's share of the industry, whatever that may prove to be. With Q/D established as the primary offshore staging area for this "frontier region" by 1976, several dozen oil service companies leased space from the Rhode Island Port Authority, which offered them special tax incentives and generous leasing arrangements. Delegations from both state and town traveled to New Orleans and Houston to woo the oil industry. State and town efforts were not always coordinated, however. Among the impacts of the early phase was a heightened tension between town and state as competition for control over oil-related development emerged in both the commercial and the administrative arenas.

The North Kingstown Chamber of Commerce decided from the outset to participate actively and aggressively in developing the oil industry. In 1978 and 1979, the chamber staged its own oil and gas trade show, an enterprise usually undertaken by such cities as Houston, London, Aberdeen, and Stavanger. In addition to sending trade delegations to the Gulf, the chamber joined the National Ocean Industries Association, a Washington-based lobbying group, in order to assert its presence as a participating body. However, North Kingstown businessmen do not possess the institutional and resource bases to protect their interests from outside domination in the same way as the Montrosians. Unlike the harbor board, the chamber is not a corporate group so much as a loose coalition activated by a few key individuals for specific purposes. Rhode Island's structural equivalent of the harbor board is the port authority, an agency directly responsible to the Department of Economic Development in Providence. The state's most powerful businessmen and financial institutions are also based in Providence, and they too have an interest in offshore prospects. With greater access to capital and to high-level sources of information and patronage, they dominate the regional picture. In 1978, for example, the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce sent a Rhode Island delegation to Scotland to take a look at the North Sea industry (which they regard as a useful and inspiring model) and to discuss the possibilities for cooperation between Scottish and Rhode Island offshore interests. No North Kingstowners were included, an omission much resented in the town.

The impact of offshore development thus goes far beyond the mechanical questions of how many rigs, work boats, and workers are involved, and it also transcends the requirements of houses, schools, and liquor licenses. In order to comprehend the extent of social impact, one must be aware of particular social structures, historical circumstances, and regional configurations. In Montrose, the local businessmen form a community knit by a common determination to maintain regional hegemony. They exercise this determination partly through the power of the harbor board, which represents a formidable alliance of legal authority and personal patronage networks. Analysis of the ways in which the merchants of Montrose have been able to penetrate and keep the local small-scale offshore market will be undertaken elsewhere. (I must point out here that there are striking differences even between Montrose and other Scottish communities, and I am not suggesting that Montrose be taken to represent all of Scotland. See, among others, Mackay and Moir 1980; Byron and Macfarlane 1980; Hunt 1976; House 1978; Storey 1977; Mackay and Mackay 1975; Button 1978; Rosie 1974; Broady 1975; Taylor 1975.)

In North Kingstown, the business arena provides a striking contrast to that of Montrose. It is diffuse, heterogeneous, far less organized, and much newer. Rather than controlling town government, it often appears to be at odds with it. Its primary vehicle is the chamber of commerce, whose organizing and decision-making powers are minimal. The proximity and

superior power of Providence and state-based interests override efforts toward autonomy. For the Montrose Harbour Board, the County Planning Authority played an advisory role. For North Kingstown, state planners have played a determining role, while town planners have attempted to tie up loose ends.

In quickly summarizing certain aspects of the Montrose and North Kingstown experiences with offshore oil development, I have stressed the importance of recognizing the organization and relative position of local enterprise and regional relationships. I have chosen to focus on competing levels of power and the struggle for control over onshore development. Emphasis has been placed on the structures and institutions that partly determine the nature of community participation in onshore benefits and there has been a deliberate avoidance of such important and controversial issues as the environmentalist cause or the rights of prior ocean users. I have also treated industry personnel and technology as constant, because only a few centers of expertise dominate the offshore industry.

To return to my original question: How far can we assume a similarity between Scottish and New England social structure for onshore planning purposes? I suggest that the similarity is very limited indeed. Examining even the limited range of structural contrasts above makes it clear that the Baldwins' suggestion of Scottish and New England similarity is highly questionable. We have seen that in an old Scottish burgh like Montrose, planning and development are institutionalized in a closed corporate board that offers little access to public input. The only effective legal constraints over their actions reside with a national-level authority whose interests in this case are more complementary than competitive. Local development is controlled by a limited and well-defended group. In a diffuse New England township like North Kingstown, however, no town-based authority or group can match the power of the state, a financially and politically far more powerful and inclusive entity that has no analog in Great Britain. North Kingstown planners and developers must take a far more passive role, and are rather in the position of weak clients subject to outside brokers.

## *NOTES*

[1] Some of the reports published by the Alaska OCS Socioeconomic Studies Program do a good job of pointing to key questions that merit investigation, but do not themselves answer these questions.

[2] "South County" has no clearly defined boundaries—it is not an official designation but a symbolic expression of Rhode Island's urban/rural split. The North Kingstown *Standard-Times* ran an article recently (April 29, 1982), entitled "Where the Hell is South County?" which airs local opinions on the subject.

[3] In 1978, a drilling support company at Davisville was picketed by members of nine unions calling for jobs. The demonstration evoked considerable local hostility.

[4] In 1972, the United States Geological Survey (USGS) announced that the Atlantic was a potential oil and gas resource for the United States, but leasing for exploration was delayed due to environmental concerns.

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