

REVIEW ESSAY

Mina Hubbard in Labrador: A Review Essay

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Mina Benson Hubbard. *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador*. Edited with an introduction by Sherrill Grace. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004, ISBN 0773527044

The Woman Who Mapped Labrador: The Life and Expedition Diary of Mina Hubbard. Diary introduced and edited by Roberta Buchanan and Bryan Greene; biography by Anne Hart. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005, ISBN 0773529241

Alexandra Pratt. *Lost Lands, Forgotten Stories: A Woman's Journey to the Heart of Labrador*. Toronto: Harper Collins, 2002, ISBN 0002255154

IT IS EXACTLY A CENTURY since a delicate-looking young widow stepped into a canoe paddled by two aboriginal guides at North West River in Labrador, and, accompanied by two more guides in another canoe, journeyed nearly 600 miles on rivers as yet unmapped to the mouth of the George River in Ungava Bay. The circumstances which precipitated this unusual voyage had occurred two years before when her husband, Leonidas Hubbard, attempting the same trip, died of starvation deep in the Labrador bush. Mina Benson Hubbard was inspired to attempt the completion of her husband's quest by her love for him, akin to adoration. She was also driven by fury, believing that her husband had been demeaned in the book about the disastrous 1903 expedition, *The Lure of Labrador Wild*, written by his surviving partner, Dillon Wallace. Her departure from the small fur-trade post was less than a

day after Dillon Wallace, with a crew of five men, embarked on a similar journey, stating that his purpose was to fulfill the promise made to his dying friend, Leonidas Hubbard.

Mina and her men completed their journey in exemplary fashion, arriving at the George River post six weeks before Wallace struggled in with only one companion, ragged and close to starvation, having survived a near disaster when their canoe overturned in freezing temperature. Both parties returned to New York to face controversy which had been stirring in the press even before they left, each attracting fervent supporters and detractors. The intense passions in the Hubbard-Wallace-Hubbard story — love, anger, grief, jealousy, and greed — still reverberate and continue to produce partisans on either side.

Hubbard and Wallace each wrote a book about her/his respective journey, neither acknowledging the existence of the other. Both books enjoyed a period of success but eventually went out of print, although Wallace's earlier book is still in print today. A cheap edition of Mina's book with a foreword by Pierre Berton was published by Breakwater Press in 1981, and is often tucked into the packs of canoeists making the trip on the George River. Otherwise, Mina Hubbard was largely forgotten, as I discovered when I gave a talk about her to the historical society of a town less than 15 kilometres from where she was born in Ontario and met a sea of blank faces.

Mina Hubbard's book, *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador*, was published in 1908, first by John Murray in London, with an imprint by William Briggs of Toronto, and in an edited version by S.S. McClure of New York. To mark the 100th anniversary of the expedition, McGill-Queen's University Press has published a complete version of the Murray edition — including even the original, serious typographical error which gave the departure from North West River as 27 July, instead of June. There is a lengthy and comprehensive introduction by the distinguished scholar Sherrill Grace, and an appendix containing the two exclusive interviews which Mina Hubbard gave to the New York *World* at the beginning and end of her trip. The photographs are placed exactly as intended by the author, with the advantage that all can be viewed without turning the book, but they are not as clear as the original glossy prints. The excellent map, drafted by technicians at the American Geographical Society from Mina's sketches and notes, is attached to the back endpaper and represents her most significant achievement.

In her penetrating analysis, Sherrill Grace examines the variety of voices heard in the text, from the grieving widow to the triumphant explorer on a voyage of self-discovery. By including two diary excerpts, that of Leonidas Hubbard as he lay dying in Labrador and the account by the guide, George Elson, of the last days of the 1903 expedition, Grace points out how Mina tried to keep her husband's name alive and in the forefront, while also highlighting her own success. William Cabot, the acknowledged expert on Labrador, wrote the original introduction, magisterial in

its description of the land and the people, and his praise for Mina all the more sincere in its restrained brevity.

The textual analysis guides the reader past the first chapter with its pious sentimentality, amounting almost to hagiography, and presents the inexperienced author searching for the right voice to attract an audience, while at the same time assuring them that she is still a lady despite having flouted societal convention in going north with four aboriginal guides as her only companions. Behind the sometimes romantic descriptions of scenery can be found a woman who is intelligent and tough, stubborn and uncompromising, and the reason that the book is now a classic of Canadian travel literature.

Grace refers to another book about the Mina Hubbard expedition called *It's All so Grand and Beautiful*. This was the working title for *The Woman who Mapped Labrador: The Life and Expedition Diary of Mina Hubbard*, which also marks the centenary. This book has the richness of a fruit cake, combining multiple and diverse ingredients into a completely satisfying whole which has form and substance. The authors each bring their own skills, the textual analysis of the scholar Roberta Buchanan, the detective work of the librarian Anne Hart, and the intimate knowledge of the terrain of Bryan Greene, former head of the Geological Survey of Newfoundland and Labrador. From the striking cover design to the attractive fonts used to introduce each section, the generous use of maps throughout the diary section, the many previously unseen photographs in the biography, and the writing throughout, this book is a treasure.

The book begins with analysis of various aspects of Mina Hubbard's 1905 journey by Buchanan and Greene and is followed by a short introduction to the complete biography of this surprising woman by Anne Hart. The largest section of the book is the actual diary of her journey, which is inserted into the biography at the point at which Mina leaves Halifax on the ship taking her to Labrador in June and finishes at the end of December that year. While footnotes are on each page of the diary, the endnotes to the rest of the book are in three distinct sections, which can be somewhat confusing unless one reads through from beginning to end.

In four brief essays Bryan Greene outlines the history of travel through Labrador, including the journeys of 1903 and 1905, and describes the Naskaupi and George rivers in terms familiar to modern canoeists. In his assessment, the major scientific contribution of the 1905 expedition was Mina's map (again reproduced in a fold-out at the end of the bibliography) which served as the basis for official maps of the region until aerial mapping was introduced in the 1930s. While she consistently estimated the latitudes as too far north of her position, she corrected misconceptions on the printed maps of the time. Her descriptions of the native people, the flora and fauna, and the scenery, while not significant as science, are written from the heart and show her appreciation of one of the last great wilderness areas on earth.

In her analyses, Roberta Buchanan examines issues of gender, race, and class, particularly in her relationship to her aboriginal guides. Mina Hubbard's response to the aesthetics of the Labrador landscape is influenced by her travelling companions who are comfortable and "at home" in the land, unlike her husband and Dillon Wallace for whom it became an alien, hostile wilderness. Her lack of racial prejudice is seen in her respect for her guides and in her reactions to the two encounters with the Innu people and particularly with the Inuit in Ungava. Always a lady, Mina could be vengeful and bitter when her ire was aroused, and, although in her book she gives the impression that Dillon Wallace did not exist, Buchanan devotes one section of the introduction to showing that he was never far from her thoughts.

In editing the daily diary Mina Hubbard kept for the six months of her journey, Buchanan has done a masterful job, supplying abundant footnotes and even translations of Cree words used by the guides. The diary, reproduced exactly as it was written, including occasional crossed-out words and misspellings, was intended only as a personal record and thus has more spontaneity than carefully polished text. The most interesting parts are the events Mina did not include in her book, especially the six weeks she spent at the George River post awaiting the ship for the return south. This was a joyous time, all anxiety of the unknown behind her and with freedom to explore the tiny community. She learned to handle a kayak and steer a canoe, used her nursing skills to the benefit of the Inuit, and gave her descriptive powers a free rein. Beneath the surface of sunshine there is a dark undercurrent as she struggles with the writing of her book, dreads the arrival of her nemesis, Dillon Wallace, and anticipates her return to the troubled world she left behind.

Anne Hart's biography is a stunning portrait of Mina Hubbard, and by its placement in the book, it is the perfect frame for the diary of the seminal event that shaped her remarkable life. After childhood on a pioneer farm in Ontario, grinding years as a teacher at a country school near the home of her aging parents, she took a rigorous nursing course. It is no wonder that Mina adored vivacious, irrepressible — but impractical — Leonidas, who saved her from the doom of spinsterhood and brought such an unexpected sparkle to her life. But more surprises lay ahead. Before her book was published, Mina had moved to England, would remarry into wealth, produce three children beginning at the age of forty, and gather about her a circle of cultured and intellectual friends. Always elegant and spirited, a perfectionist with a fiery nature underneath amazing self-control, the fearlessness and strong will which took her to Labrador never abandoned her in the storms ahead. Anne Hart deserves the highest praise for finding and securing the diaries of the two Hubbards and George Elson for the Centre for Newfoundland Studies, and for following every lead to bring Mina Hubbard back to vibrant life.

Over the years, Mina Hubbard was not entirely forgotten. In 1988, James Davidson, a historian, and a physician, John Rugge, also canoeing partners, published *Great Heart*, the history of the Labrador journeys of the two Hubbards and Wallace, centred around George Elson, the guide of two of the expeditions, using

Mina's private name for him as the title. This was thoroughly researched but written in fictional style with invented conversation. In 2004, another American author, Randall Silvis, created a work of creative non-fiction around the events of 1903 and 1905, entitled *Heart so Hungry*.

Between these two books, a young Englishwoman, captivated by reading excerpts of Mina's diary in the *National Geographic* in 1993, began to weave her own fantasy of retracing Mina's journey. After a preliminary visit to Newfoundland to read the actual diary, and then taking the coastal boat to North West River, Alexandra Pratt returned to Cornwall to set about raising money and gathering her outfit. To those familiar with the Hubbard/Wallace saga, it seemed the height of impertinence that a young, inexperienced woman with a single guide could expect to conquer the upstream travel on the Naskaupi River, which had nearly defeated Mina's four stalwarts. Indeed, the trip failed, ending as they reached the worst of the upstream travel. Threatened by forest fires, her guide lamed by injuring his knee on a rock, they had to call for a helicopter to take them out. Surprisingly, the honesty of the writer, her empathy with her Innu guide, and her wonderful use of language has created a book, *Lost Land, Forgotten Stories*, that is a pleasure to read. She weaves the Hubbard story into the narrative throughout, and while it was worthwhile reminding readers of Mina's achievement in 2002, the two magnificent centennial books produced by McGill-Queen's University Press, now do this more effectively.

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