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Because It Was There — and Not There: Labrador Adventures and Correlatives for Modern Living

The Lure of the Labrador Wild. Dillon Wallace. Breakwater, 1983. Reprint of 1905 ed. published by F. Revell, New York. 267 pp. paper. ISBN 0-919948-38-3. ***The Labrador Fiasco.*** Margaret Atwood. O.W. Toad, Bloomsbury Quid, 1996. 41 pp. paper. ISBN 0-7475-2889-6. Sold as a two-book set.

Following a trend of scientific and travel expeditions reflecting an interest in Labrador which had begun in the first half of the nineteenth century, in 1903 Leonidas Hubbard, a 29-year-old magazine editor from New York, determined to retrace a 1838-39 journey of a Hudson's Bay agent, John McLean, through the wilds of Labrador. Hubbard recruited two confederates for the daunting trek, Dillon Wallace, a lawyer by profession and the author of the book under review, and George Elson, "a half breed Cree Indian from down on James Bay." Hubbard's ostensible objective was to travel to the eastern and northern part of the Labrador peninsula to Fort Chimo, Ungava, and to study the habits of the Indians, who were reported to be "the most primitive on the North American continent" (7).

Wallace's account, however, reveals that additional motives inspired this idealistic adventurer. Caught up in the romantic notion of travelling to regions where no white man had preceded him, Hubbard was lured to the vast and barren regions of Labrador precisely for his own reputation. That McLean's incomplete record of his trip indicated to Hubbard that his experience was less of exciting venture into the virgin wilderness than a harrowing struggle against hardship and starvation only served to sharpen the ambitions of Hubbard, who in the spirit of Scott, Amundsen and the early Mount Everest climbers such as the tragic George Mallory, resolved to pursue his improbable quest against all odds. For Hubbard, Labrador was the unexplored crucible where his "manliness" would be put to the test.

And so it was that Hubbard, Wallace and Elson reached Labrador by steamer in early July of 1903, where, as Wallace would later reflect, "we were destined to encounter a series of misadventures that should call for the exercise of all our fortitude and manhood" (17). The preparations for the trip precipitated the misadventures to no small degree. Although Hubbard was meticulous in considering preparatory details, the trio set out with insufficient provisions and necessities, including spare moccasins and a gill net for catching fish. The travel plans, which over a few months were to evolve into the survival plans, were essentially to embrace the principle of living off the land. As matters unfolded, it was to become clear that the Labrador land in the summer and fall of 1903 was to be particularly unyielding.

Also, the route calculated by Hubbard to reach Ungava involved crossing Grand Lake, and to proceed up the Nascaupee River which emptied into the lake. Alas, receiving no reports from area residents on any other river which fed into the lake, and having dismissed the mouth of the Nascaupee as an inconsequential bay, Hubbard and his companions instead paddled up the Susan River, and on into what Wallace later called the "dreadful Susan Valley." The upshot of this crucial geographic miscalculation was that the adventurers not only failed to reach their destination, but failed to give themselves a realistic chance of doing so. After enduring innumerable portages, stifling August heat and swarms of insects, they were forced to turn back as the bitter October weather descended. After being reduced to consuming broth made of moccasins and caribou hide, Hubbard died of starvation on the return trip, and Wallace and George Elson barely survived.

Wallace's book, then, is both a laboriously detailed account of the technicalities of the aborted expedition, and a tribute to the indomitable perseverance and nobility of the stranded adventurers. Hubbard exhibits heroic courage and stoicism as he succumbs to the desolate land that lured him from hearth and home (not to mention a young and caring wife, who in 1905, herself explored Labrador and mapped the route her husband died attempting to find). Wallace displays the same fortitude and Christian spirit as Hubbard, while the mixed-breed George Elson, in an almost archetypal casting, is shown to be strong and resourceful beyond normal human limits.

It is notable that as the journey and the trio's prospects for survival worsen, Hubbard's campsite recitations turn from those of Kipling, which celebrate the irresistible call of the wild and its associations with manliness and cleanliness, to biblical verses and hymns proselytizing trust in God. In the final analysis, Wallace's account carries little of the imaginative verve of classic adventure tales. Rather, it is a testimony to the human will to endure and survive, and the stoic acceptance of fate and of God's will. The improbable journey and the work itself might be best considered in its own, early nineteenth century context, summed up in the words of "an unknown friend" cited in Wallace's preface to the sixth edition of the book published in 1906: "To dare and die so divinely and leave cloud-robed human victory, angel attended by reverence and peace ... a gospel of nobleness and faith" (263).

Margaret Atwood's short novel, *The Labrador Fiasco*, features a story within a story, and the story within is Dillon Wallace's *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, reviewed above. Atwood's title includes the descriptor most modern readers would apply to the ill-fated expedition of Leonidas Hubbard and his companions, but this delicately drawn piece is far more than a modern reflection on the foolishness of an ill-conceived journey into the interior of Labrador. Instead, Atwood utilizes the account of Hubbard *et al.* as a metaphor to explore another kind of exploration of the unknown, juxtaposing the events in the earlier work with more prosaic complications of modern family ties.

The aging father of Atwood's narrator, and the main character in the book, has suffered a stroke six years before the story begins, and in his convalescence, takes particular interest in the chronicle of Hubbard's misadventure. As the narrator's mother reads the story to him, the father, who some thirty years earlier himself went on canoe trips and probably yearned for more exotic peregrinations, declares Hubbard and his friends "darn fools," even while he harbours a fascination for the travails of the trio.

Between the father's interjected comments and views on the disastrous expedition, Atwood recounts the essentials of the novel against which her work is framed; indeed, save the details of the preparations for the trip and the attendant complications of Hubbard getting to Labrador, this 41-page book captures the essence of the earlier novel. More significant, however, is how Atwood employs aspects of the journey of Wallace and his companions to reflect on the gradual deterioration and alienation experienced by the elderly father.

The father writes out lists of provisions that Hubbard should have taken on his trip, even though it would have been impractical or impossible to do so. He takes on the role of the typecast wise, old Indian (since there is none in Wallace's account, as Atwood parenthetically notes) and chides Hubbard for leading the explorers into an area where food is scarce. He praises the resourceful half-breed, George, who leaves Hubbard and Wallace to find help, and does not return when he happens to kill a porcupine, knowing that to do so would mean that none of them would likely get out alive.

Near the end of Atwood's story, the father, initially inspired to live the Labrador adventure vicariously because of his initial stroke, metaphorically takes on the characteristics of the doomed Hubbard party when he suffers a second attack. Now, like the three adventurers, he has himself become "lost." Like Hubbard specifically, he loses his appetite, he is constantly cold and he wants to go "home" (home not in the sense of a specific location, as is the case for Hubbard, but in a temporal sense to a time now irretrievable). At the conclusion of the story, the narrator's father ruefully declares that he "never thought this would happen" (41). He is referring not to being a stroke victim, for he is unaware he is one, but to getting lost. And lost he is, certainly as lost as were Hubbard and his companions, but with the added poignancy of the contrast between a spirited and vigorous youth and a confused, aged shadow of humanity.

Wallace's novel ends with an apotheosis, if a somewhat facile one, transforming a story of defeat and death into one of spiritual triumph celebrating human perseverance, nobility and trust in God. No such release is afforded Atwood's characters, or her readers, and if there is any stoicism inherent in this well-crafted conceit, perhaps it is in the face of inevitable physical deterioration, human contact and involvement, at any level, is meaningful.

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