

Louie Montague. *I Never Knowed It Was Hard: Memoirs of a Labrador Trapper.*

Maura Hanrahan

Volume 29, Number 2, Fall 2014

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds29_2rev02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1719-1726 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Hanrahan, M. (2014). Review of [Louie Montague. *I Never Knowed It Was Hard: Memoirs of a Labrador Trapper.*] *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 29(2), 321–323.

Keating, Michael. *Nations against the State: The New Politics of Nationalism in Quebec, Catalonia and Scotland*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Liam O'Flaherty
Simon Fraser University

Louie Montague. *I Never Knewed It Was Hard: Memoirs of a Labrador Trapper*, ed. Elizabeth Dawson. St. John's: ISER Books, 2013. ISBN 978-1-894725-12-5

Louie Montague's voice rings strong and clear in his 2013 memoir — the result of a natural gift for narrative but also the fruit of a rich and laborious process described by the editor, Elizabeth Dawson. Born on Valentine's Day in 1935 and weighing no less than 11 pounds, Montague has lived a life that details recent Labrador history — especially economic history.

Montague trapped as a boy, staying in school until only Grade 7. At 16, he was making \$80 a month cleaning pots on the newly constructed air force base at Goose Bay, the institution that effectively ended the trapping that was once so central to the Labrador economy. As Montague says, "Trapping was never steady; you never knew if you'd make any money even if you did the same amount of work.... With the Base there was a steady paycheque" (84). And so a Hudson's Bay Company official who traded with 90 trappers the year before the base opened, traded with only five the next year. (In addition to Louie's account, Robin McGrath's introduction provides further detailed analysis of the decline of trapping.) Trapping never left Montague, though; he left his pot-cleaning job after a few months to return to the trapline, beginning a work-life pattern that he and many other Labrador men returned to time and time again.

In common with others of his generation, Montague worked on many important initiatives in Labrador, including the DEW Line system, road construction, geological surveys, prospecting, the cable car at Northwest River, and the Churchill Falls hydroelectric project. Collectively, these projects comprised the industrialization of Labrador and the alteration of the landscape that was the pivot of the peninsula's Indigenous cultures. In Montague's assessment, the base was "the best thing that ever happened to Labrador" (89), as it curtailed economic privation and food shortages, and enhanced external communication. The base may have caused some erosion of internal Labrador

communications, however. As Montague explains, after the base there was no need for trips to Cartwright or Hopedale for tea or flour.

Montague also did more traditional work, such as guiding at Ashuanipi Lake in western Labrador, where trout grew to 40 pounds. Interestingly, he once guided a *National Geographic* crew who were tracing Mina Hubbard's route to Ungava. Even more interesting is the fact that his father and other trappers only referenced Hubbard once, preferring to name her Indigenous guide, Gilbert Blake. I am reminded of a southern Inuk's bafflement with "a white man's failed journey" (Leonidas Hubbard's) through a route that Innu travelled countless times without fanfare.

Labrador women were more likely to seek an education away from home, notably Millicent Blake Loder, author of *Daughter of Labrador* (1989), who went to Wisconsin in 1933, and, later, Minnesota, to nursing school. Montague was not the only Labrador man to do so, but he was one of only a few of his contemporaries who acquired formal education outside Labrador, spending two years in St. John's for academic upgrading and forestry courses. His work with the provincial department of forestry and wildlife parallels the institutionalization of the Newfoundland government presence in Labrador.

The work history of Montague's late wife, Ruth Anderson of Nain, informs us about women's roles in Labrador's economic history. Ruth worked with Moravian minister Rev. Peacock, as a cook for the Grenfell mission and then for Wheeler Airlines, as a laundress at the base, as a homemaker raising their six children, as a home-care worker, and as a craftsperson, making embroidered Grenfell parkas and, later, frequently creating items with Montague. Given this and other references to the International Grenfell Association, the manuscript would have benefited from more explanation of all things Grenfell, probably in the introduction.

Most fascinating are Montague's accounts of the friendships between his people and the Innu, demonstrated by boyhood travels with the Innu, Innu visits to Northwest River homes, and Sinabest Otwan's (Atuan's) effective doctoring of Montague's father on the trapline. Montague's father, John, was fluent in Innu-aimun. The book also makes a significant contribution through three appendices that provide information on trapping: daily activities, necessary supplies, including "a few candies," and tilts. These nicely complement the "Traplines and Custom Law" chapter, although the writing needs a little more clarity here: how are we to interpret "get after him"? ("him" being a violator of custom law). The photos, stretching from 1887 to the present day, are beautiful and, like his words, evocatively bring Louie Montague's Labrador story to life.

There are, however, also some weaknesses in the editing. Boldfacing words that appear in the glossary is a distracting practice not to be encouraged. Further, some of these words are not only local, as claimed, but are widely used elsewhere, certainly throughout Newfoundland (“turr,” “crackie,” and “tinker” among them) and beyond (e.g., “pemmican”). Another flaw is the sparse and therefore confusing discussion in the introduction about identity in Labrador. In Montague’s words, “My people have been in Labrador since the late 1700s. Most of my people came from England or Scotland ... married Aboriginal women, usually Inuit...” (36). Robin McGrath, in the introduction, uses the outmoded word “Settler” to describe Montague’s family. On the back cover Montague is called an Inuit elder and, within, he says he is a Nunatsiavut beneficiary. Thus, contextualization of changing terminology and identity in Labrador is needed. This would include consideration of issues such as the Moravianization of the northernmost Inuit; the origins of the people known variously as *kablunangajuit*, half-breeds, métis/Métis, Settlers, and eventually Nunatsiavut and southern Inuit; internal colonization; racism; and generational change from Montague’s time. It would also include the role of industrialization in Indigenous regions like Labrador and Canada’s Aboriginal policy, which narrowly defines complex Indigenous identities. To do the subject justice, this book needs more than passing references to “Settlers” or a mention of Inuit elders on the back cover.

Maura Hanrahan

Memorial University of Newfoundland

Shannon Ryan. *A History of Newfoundland in the North Atlantic to 1818*. St. John’s: Flanker Press, 2012. ISBN 978-1771170166

After a distinguished teaching and writing career at Memorial University, Shannon Ryan has produced a sweeping and efficiently written study of Newfoundland in its proper Atlantic context. There is little new research here, nor new ground covered, but a potpourri of facts and a narrative of English commercial and social development expertly portray Newfoundland as a British and Atlantic place. Here we read the facts of settlement and life in early