

***Labrador Odyssey: The Journal and Photographs of Eliot Cunven on the Second Voyage of Wilfred Grenfell, 1893.* Ronald Rompkey, ed.**

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WHEN, AS A YOUNG student, I first read D.W. Prowse's brief overview of Labrador history in his monumental *History of Newfoundland* (1895), I was struck — even shocked — by the tonal discrepancy between Prowse's dispassionate discourse and the (to me) amazing photographs of Labrador liveryes. The former talked rather blandly of a mission aimed at "alleviating the condition of the poor Labrador fishermen"; the latter — the gaunt unsmiling faces (mainly of children) — gave a small hint of reality, showing what the "condition" might have been like. Unlike the text, which merely recorded the circumstance, the photographs haunted my imagination, providing a rare glimpse of character. For I knew then, as Donald Creighton would put it later, that true history should be the "encounter between character and circumstance" and that written history must be the "story" of that encounter.

I realized later, of course, the danger of such a view: if told in the singular, the story becomes mere hagiography. The Grenfell story was one such story, his mission having been represented (in his own writings and in those about him) as a single-handed, heroic encounter. It had somehow lost sight of the "innumerable" biographies and encounters that comprise essential history. In recent years, however, thanks to the willingness of such people as Paddon and Thomas to tell their stories, and the efforts of such cultural historians as Ronald Rompkey who have produced and probed into the peripheral stories, that danger has been obviated. The "Grenfell story" has now, and is continually becoming, an adventure in micro-history, from which we may, if we like, distil a collective meaning; or, just as preferable perhaps, learn to appreciate the many minute and idiosyncratic details of the main story. Eliot Curwen's journal is a case in point.

In the larger history of the Grenfell mission to Labrador —spanning a century of time and impinging on the lives of many thousands of people (doctors, fisherfolk and merchants) — Curwen’s micro-history may seem a minor episode. He was, after all, only on the Labrador coast for four months, July to October, 1893, as one of two doctors who had volunteered to assist Wilfred Grenfell in the second year of his Deep Sea Mission to Labrador. The official report says little about him, except that he visited some thirty-five settlements along the coast, treating a thousand patients. But those sparse facts fail again to reveal any encounter between “character and circumstance”; and this Curwen’s journal does as few other documents do. It enables us, as one culturalist puts it, to discern the “potent habits of consciousness and act.” Written on the spot, before the Mission was an established fact of Newfoundland society, it is free of imposed expectations and encomia. Written simply for family, with no eye to publication, it offers, as Rompkey notes in his introduction, “a view of Newfoundland and Labrador life that he could not have revealed publicly: the political and social mores, the sectarianism, the problems of the fishing industry, the language, the poverty, the economy” and even “some small dissatisfaction with the young Wilfred Grenfell.” Therefore, even though we must, in terms of historical credibility, remain cautious of any such idiosyncratic text, with its social prejudices and religious agenda, we are convinced this one can teach us much that is otherwise unknowable. Indeed, such anomalous texts are extremely valuable in assessing what might be called the “normal” state of affairs as revealed in any larger history.

Curwen’s journal is, then, an extremely valuable cultural document; and its publication an immense contribution to our understanding and appreciation of both the Grenfell story and Labrador history. Even without embellishment, it would have been a readable, informative and challenging document; for Curwen’s daily entries are always copious and colorful. But Rompkey has (wisely, I think) chosen to enliven his edition of the journal by providing, both for contrast and amplification, some of Wilfred Grenfell’s “more tendentious” reports of the same events described by (and alongside those of) Curwen. We can thereby begin to see how “character” — differing attitudes, biases, social upbringing and so forth — reacts to “circumstance” and shapes the story itself.

And, finally, there are the photographs. In spite of the fact that they were taken by Curwen and Grenfell, and are accompanied by commentary, they somehow tell stories of their own, different from those of Grenfell and Curwen. They provide yet another micro-history, a sense of immediacy, which sometimes supports and sometimes modifies the main text. Their inclusion is both a delight and a challenge. In fact, *Labrador Odyssey* is itself, as both primary text and edition, exactly that. A delight to read at the experiential level; a delight to simply hold and view — its shape, page-layout and photo-placement having an artistic appeal. And a challenge in that the whole, including Rompkey’s excellent (and unobtrusive) introduction and notes force us to consider the value of various kinds of “life-writing,” the role

of “self” in such discourses, and the impact of it all on what we choose to call “history.” And, even if the reader does not want to accept the challenge, the delight is still reason enough to purchase this wonderful book.