

Moore, Tom. *Wilfred Grenfell*.

Ronald Rompkey

Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 1986

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds2_1re05

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Rompkey, R. (1986). Review of [Moore, Tom. *Wilfred Grenfell*.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 2(1), 106–107.

Wilfred Grenfell. Tom Moore. Don Mills: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, 1980. [64] p. \$4.50.

RONALD ROMPKEY

Since the beginning of this century, a minor publishing industry based on the activities of Dr. Wilfred Grenfell in northern Newfoundland and Labrador has steadily sustained itself. Excluding Grenfell's own voluminous outpourings of opinion and self-promotion as well as his autobiography, *A Labrador Doctor* (1919), this industry has produced over twenty-five biographical works, all advancing the legend of a vigorous young Englishman of distinguished ancestry who married a beautiful woman and dedicated himself to improving the lives of destitute people. These works have usually divided themselves between exotic adventure and earnest stories reduced to simple terms for the benefit of children. Though there is no introduction or preface to tell the reader for sure, the present volume, included in a series called "The Canadians," appears to fall into the latter category. Within its brief compass, it recycles certain assumptions about Grenfell's life by borrowing heavily from the autobiography and from the most thorough biography written so far, Lennox Kerr's *Wilfred Grenfell: His Life and Work* (1959). What kinds of assumptions are these?

Moore accepts the cherished notion that Grenfell was descended from the sea dog Sir Richard Grenville and other fighting Grenvilles. "All were related to Wilfred on his father's side of the family. All were brave fighting men who fought hard and even died for what they believed was right," he confidently asserts (4-5) without a single piece of evidence. The fact is that no document has ever demonstrated the connection even though Grenfell clearly enjoyed the sense of heroic kinship and emphasized the link with the Grenvilles. Moore also advances the accepted notion that Grenfell's wife, a lady accustomed to conducting herself in an aristocratic style, was a rich woman with connections useful for her husband's work. "She was well-to-do," he claims, "and had grown up in the richest social circles of Chicago" (49). This is only partially true. The fact is that her father died while still a relatively young man and that she and her mother lived on an estate owned by relatives in Lake Forest, Illinois. Intelligent, capable, and handsome, she contributed not wealth but educational awareness and superb organizational skills to the cause.

Wilfred Grenfell does not rely for effect solely upon its assumptions. It

makes available some interesting photographs of one of the most publicized men of the pre-television era. Unfortunately, they do not constitute the best selection that could have been made from the tens of thousands of prints available, and their arrangement does not convey the clearest impression. In sixty-four pages, there are forty-five illustrations. The author seems unaware that many of them were staged for publicity by Grenfell's photographer, Professor Fred Sears. Moreover, the sequence does not match the sequence of the text: we are barely clear of the nineteenth century when a white-haired, aged Dr. Grenfell appears before us on his last trip to the Coast in 1938. Unsuitably arranged, the illustrations are also carelessly captioned. For example, Miss Eleanor Cushman, Grenfell's secretary, is identified as Grenfell's "wife" (29). The important presentation of a schooner by Henry Ford (56) for the sole use of the Grenfell mission is reduced to a simple "visit" from one of the famous people Grenfell is supposed to have "made friends" with. Dr. Charles Curtis, Grenfell's successor in St. Anthony and the father of the modern medical service now established there, is identified wrongly (22, 26) as Dr. John Mason Little, a Boston surgeon who departed St. Anthony in 1917. Later, Curtis is identified correctly (52), but he resumes the identity of Little on the facing page (53).

These may seem minor quibbles, but they point to a lack of preparation and editorial care. The booklet perpetuates received opinion and legend rather than studying Grenfell afresh from the vantage point of the 1980s.

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY