

# James West Davidson and John Ruge. *Great Heart: The History of a Labrador Adventure.*

Martha MacDonald

Volume 22, Number 2, Autumn 2007

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds22\\_2rv06](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds22_2rv06)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

MacDonald, M. (2007). Review of [James West Davidson and John Ruge. *Great Heart: The History of a Labrador Adventure.*] *Newfoundland Studies*, 22(2), 557–561.

must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies." When Edna's courage faltered, she became despondent and eventually swam far out to sea committing suicide. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf, mused about women, writing, motherhood, and melancholy.

It is to Moranna's credit that she never completely surrendered to the symptoms of a illness that eventually defeated artists such as Woolf, Anne Sexton and Christiana Pflug. After her daughters were taken from her, Moranna spent a brief stint in the psychiatric wing of a Halifax hospital before returning to Baddeck, where she was saved not by the community but by a strange vision: one of her crazy ancestors, appearing in a tree on the family property, instructed Moranna to become a carver and a keeper of her family's chaotic history. Lacking the legitimacy of sculptor, painter or writer, Moranna became a folk artist, an appropriate vocation given her rural location. And like women artists before her, Moranna discovered that art could be her salvation. Encouraged to write about her experiences by her physician, Anne Sexton in "All My Pretty Ones," expressed her deep anguish when for years mental illness kept her from her daughter: "Once I mailed you a picture of a rabbit / and a postcard ... / as if it were normal / to be a mother and be gone." Though Moranna was never forcibly confined to a mental institution, she was estranged from her two daughters for thirty years; as a "gone" mother, she knew the grief of writing letters which her daughters never acknowledged. And as Mad Mory, she knew only too well the rough road leading "to bedlam and part way back."

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf wrote, "Books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately." Clark, it seems, since her earliest publications has been writing around and toward the related motifs of madness, motherhood and creativity. If *Swimming Toward the Light* is a young writer's guardedly optimistic take on what it means to be a daughter struggling to find her own way in the world, then *An Audience of Chairs* returns to consider more fully and more compassionately a daughter's much darker and more disturbing relationship with her mother and her other female relations. As Woolf so succinctly observed, "a woman writing thinks back through her mothers."

Valerie Legge  
Memorial University

James West Davidson and John Ruge. *Great Heart: The History of a Labrador Adventure*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006, ISBN 10 0-7735-3075-4 and ISBN 13 978-0-7735-3075-1

JAMES WEST DAVIDSON and John Ruge's *Great Heart*, the story of the two Hubbard/Wallace expeditions through the Labrador interior and the human drama involved, has been published in a new edition by McGill-Queen's University Press.

The first edition was published in 1988 by Viking Penguin and was the result of Davidson and Rugge's passion for canoeing, which led them into strange waters, both literally and literarily. The book interweaves the true accounts of the journey of Leonidas Hubbard, Dillon Wallace, and their guide George Elson, and the subsequent journeys taken separately by Wallace and by Mina Hubbard, Leonidas Hubbard's widow. This book is a representation of the facts known about all the journeys, with some invention of possible events in order to present the voices of the protagonists.

It is significant that the 2006 version, complete with an introduction dated 2000 and an afterword from the authors, is published by McGill-Queen's. That places it in the same category of scholarly northern literature that brought forth Sherrill Grace's new edition of *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador* (2004) and Anne Hart, Roberta Buchanan, and Bryan Greene's *The Woman Who Mapped Labrador* (2005). These sources quote *Great Heart* numerous times, though they also refer to Davidson and Rugge's work as "fiction." This combination of fact and fiction is the difficulty I have with this book; ironically, it is so well-researched that one is tempted to take the imaginative parts as truth as well.

The new edition retains the story with some important changes. The notes are identical and the text is largely the same, but the authors have taken care to correct mistakes they had made the first time around, including the burial place of Hubbard, and Mina Hubbard's death date. Their reference to the Labrador Explorations Symposium shows that they continued to be interested in the tale and were happy to acquire further information about the protagonists of the story. Indeed, their renewed acquaintance with Labradorians seems to have been the impetus for making sure that the story was as accurately represented as possible. They used the diaries of Mina Hubbard, Dillon Wallace, and George Elson as sources, and found a valuable collection of information in the newspaper accounts of the time.

The events of the actual journeys are well known: Hubbard was sponsored by *Outing* magazine of New York to follow his dream of travelling from North West River to Ungava Bay, hoping to meet the Innu, known at the time as the Naskapi, and to witness the great caribou migration. The journey had not been done before, but was thought to be possible; indeed, the publisher of *Outing* wondered whether it was challenging enough to appeal to his readership. In the event, the circumstances of the journey were such that the three adventurers, two of whom, Wallace and Hubbard, were largely inexperienced in true wilderness travel, took the wrong river when following the tentative directions provided to them by the Labradorians they consulted and by the dotted lines on the map produced by A.P. Low. Hubbard died of hunger, and his two companions came close to suffering the same fate.

The legacy of this loss was two further expeditions which set out in a spirit of fierce though unspoken rivalry; both Mina Hubbard and Dillon Wallace retraced and finished the journey Hubbard had not been able to complete, and both were mo-

tivated by their devotion to the man and a determination to serve his memory. Mina Hubbard resented what she felt was a slanted telling of the tale of her husband's last journey, and she blamed Wallace for both leaving him to starve and for tarnishing his memory. For his part, Wallace was amazed at Mina Hubbard's reaction and determined to finish the journey to honour a commitment he felt he had made. Accordingly, the two expeditions set out from North West River on June 1905 and completed the journey, although Mina Hubbard arrived six weeks ahead of Wallace, in better health and provisions.

The other key figure in both journeys, the man for whom the book is named, is George Elson, the Scots-Cree guide from Hudson Bay who accompanied Hubbard on the first journey and agreed to lead Mina Hubbard on her quest. "Great Heart" was her name for him, and the book shows us his voice set next to those of the other adventurers. Davidson and Rugge imagine Elson's voice, while the earlier published accounts of Leonidas and Mina Hubbard, and Wallace provide a sounder basis to reconstruct their points of view. The fusion of the stories and the speculation on the motivations and feelings of the parties involved are what make this book a fascinating work of creative non-fiction.

The sources for the book are the published accounts by Dillon Wallace and Mina Hubbard, and diaries, including those of Hubbard, Elson, and Wallace. These are rich accounts and have been subsequently used to provide detailed annotated versions and biographies by Grace, Hart, and Buchanan, amongst others. What Davidson and Rugge do is provide a voice for George Elson which far exceeds the meagre notes he left behind and the reference to an elusive "second book," the diary wherein presumably he recorded his more private thoughts, and which, if extant, has not yet been found. The imagined inner thoughts of George Elson are what makes the book both immensely readable and a little controversial. In a story which makes use of primary sources so thoroughly, are we to believe that the authors are close to the truth in what they say about the feelings and motivations of the characters?

There are several examples where this extrapolation leads to questions. Most noticeable is the idea that George Elson and Mina Hubbard shared a budding romance on their journey. The authors never claim to have proven this, but the picture they develop of a strong attachment bordering on that of lovers adds a flavour of romance that seems more fictional than the rest of the book. Whether such feelings existed between the two is unknown; at the Labrador Explorations Symposium organized in 2005 by the Labrador Institute of Memorial University, descendants of Mina Hubbard expressed their doubt, while descendants of Gilbert Blake, the North West River guide on the journey, suggested that such an attachment did exist.

Unlike some presentations of the Hubbard story, this one privileges neither Dillon Wallace nor Mina Hubbard. The portrayal of Mina Hubbard is a flattering one and as such is a good addition to the story. But there is evidence to show that she

was a strong-minded woman with a fine ability to hold a grudge; her obsession with clearing her husband's name was derived from a reading of Wallace's account that she took to be critical of her husband's abilities, but which is very little apparent to a reader of Wallace's memoir. Episodes from her own book, such as the visit to the Naskapi where she pressures the chief's daughter to hand over her fine beaded hat as a souvenir (the girl refuses) paint a less flattering portrait of the explorer, as does her anger over the destruction of a caribou skin which is clearly not George's fault but for which she evidently holds him responsible.

This brings us to another difficulty faced in the book: the presentation of Labrador ethnicity. Unlike the Labrador landscape, which has changed very little (re-tracing Mina Hubbard's route for the first part of the journey present-day travellers see the same view she saw leaving North West River), the character of Labrador and the self-perceptions of Labradorians have changed greatly. The authors make some errors which are not part of the novelization; they describe Bert Blake as "half-Montagnais" and set him among the men speaking Cree among themselves, but Blake was the product of European and Inuit ancestry and would not have spoken that language, though he was fluent in Innu-aimun. More crucial perhaps to the examination of how such a journey could take place is the state of Labrador ethnicity itself, which in 2007 is very much focused on its aboriginal past and down-playing of the Scottish and English heritage of the residents. Several writers have made much of the fact that a single white woman was travelling in the bush with four aboriginal men. At the time of the Hubbard expeditions, however, the Labrador people providing guidance to the travellers would have thought of themselves as "settlers" and while acknowledging their Inuit past and the debts they owed it, they would not have thought of themselves as wholly aboriginal (pers. commun., Jean Blake Crane and Bella McLean Shouse). And neither would George Elson. The assertion that a great divide existed between Mina as a civilized white woman and the band of experts who guaranteed her safety but would not have been invited to dinner by her is at odds with the way Labrador settler families saw themselves at that time. (Gilbert Blake is quoted in *The Labrador Settlers* as saying, "William Montague, Henry Groves, Charlie Goudie, Arch Goudie and I were the first white men who went in there to trap among the Indians in the early 1900's ..." [18].) And Mina Hubbard, who succeeded to the English upper classes in her second marriage, was the product of a pioneering Ontario farm family and would have been no stranger to domestic labour and physical discomfort.

Mina Hubbard's expressed intention was to undertake the trip with the same equipment her husband had used in order to prove that he had not made errors in planning and that, without some unforeseeable circumstances, he could have completed the journey. Ironically, a hundred years later the impression remains that if he had been as efficient as his wife was later, if he had taken adequate provisions, a shotgun, and a guide who had actually travelled the territory before, he would not have perished. In attempting to save his reputation, she solidified him in the public

eye as an eager and frivolous boy. His diary entries and those of Wallace show a terrible fixation on food which seems somehow to reduce their humanity. Her own accounts were of a journey that was not without incident but which did not provide the hair-raising elements of danger which probably contributed to the continued printings of Wallace's book even after her own slipped out of the public eye. Mina Hubbard's account languished in obscurity, out of print from 1908 till 1981, and by the admission of her descendants and the observations of Anne Hart we see that even her own family knew little about this benchmark achievement.

Much of scholarly and general interest has now been published on these expeditions, but someone coming to the tale for the first time could not do better than read *Great Heart*, which combines scholarly rigour with great readability. The book remains non-judgmental about the rivalry between the parties and the weaknesses of character evident in both. Instead, it assigns a proper place to George Elson, least understood and most important to the success of the expeditions. Davidson and Rugge have given Mina her due as an explorer rather than a female eccentric, and have shown Wallace in a sympathetic light, a man who could not imagine how Mina Hubbard could object to his book.

*Great Heart* has contributed substantially to the revival of a travel narrative that would be newsworthy even now, a century later. The humour of the conversation, real or imagined, is somewhat forced and the focus on George's contemplations about why writing is important do not fit as smoothly as the other pieces, but these are small nubs in the skillful weaving. The epilogue, in particular, provides a fascinating account of their own journey in research. These travel accounts have everything: death, romance, bitter rivalry, fame, and grief. Davidson and Rugge's account is an essential first stop in following the rigorous journeys of Labrador explorers.

Martha MacDonald  
Memorial University

Michael Crummey. *The Wreckage*. Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2006, ISBN 0-385-66061-8

*"There isn't another country in the world could have dropped those bombs and then carried on claiming love is the cure for all that ails the world."*

SPOKEN BY ALOYSIOUS FUREY many years after returning home from World War II, these words gesture back to the novel's epigraph by American anthropologist Ruth Benedict, generating questions about identity (who we "think" we are), our assumptions about other cultures, and our infinite capacity for love and hate.

In *The Wreckage*, Michael Crummey examines issues relating to personal and national identity through intersecting moments in the lives of several charac-