

Grenfell and his Successors

J. K. Hiller

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REVIEW ARTICLE

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Grenfell of Labrador. A Biography. Ronald Rompkey. University of Toronto Press, 1991.

Adrift on an Ice Pan [1909]. Wilfred Grenfell. Introduction by Ronald Rompkey, St. John's: Creative Publishers, 1992.

The Grenfell Obsession. An Anthology. Patricia O'Brien (comp. and ed.). St. John's: Creative Publishers, 1992.

Labrador Doctor. My Life with the Grenfell Mission. W.A. Paddon. Halifax: Goodread Biographies, 1990.

From Sled to Satellite. My Years with the Grenfell Mission. Gordon W. Thomas. Toronto: Irwin, 1987.

J.K. HILLER

I SEEM TO HAVE KNOWN Wilfred Grenfell all my life. He first appeared when my mother brought home for me from the library an improving book: a children's version of that missionary blockbuster, *Adrift on an Ice Pan*. It had an ice-blue and white cover, depicting the hero and his dogs *in extremis*, and like thousands of other middle class suburban readers in England and North America, I was very impressed. Indeed, the words "ice pan" and "Grenfell" must have been closely associated in many people's minds a generation or two ago. Ronald Rompkey accurately remarks in his welcome new biography that the ice pan incident turned Grenfell into a folk hero (199). So it is fitting that one the books published in connection with the 1992 centenary of Grenfell's arrival in Newfoundland and Labrador should have been a reissue of his most famous and dramatic book. Given its importance, however, the publisher should have taken more care with

its design and production, and might have allowed Rompkey a few more pages of introduction.

The ice pan incident is a symbolic event, which encapsulates a great deal about Grenfell and his mission – as Pierre Berton emphasized in an essay which, until the recent group of publications, was one of the best available introductions to the subject.¹ On Easter Sunday 1908, Grenfell was in St. Anthony, the electric leader of an isolated group of devoted expatriate mission workers. Then adventure beckoned: a dog team arrived from Canada Bay to fetch a doctor. Ever the knight errant, Grenfell collected his gear, harnessed his dogs (including his *pet spaniel*), and set off, the Canada Bay people following behind. They spent the night at Lock's Cove. It began to rain, and a heavy sea loosened the ice. The next day he sent the other team on ahead – it was much slower than his, and he did not like waiting for it to catch up – and set off on his own, deciding to save time by crossing an arm of Hare Bay on an ice bridge, rather than sticking to the safety of the shoreline. Before he was across the bridge broke up, his sledge and supplies drifted away, and Grenfell found himself floating out to sea with his dogs. He killed three of them and used their skins to keep himself from freezing. He was eventually sighted from land and rescued. Back among the Guest House circle at St. Anthony, one of his first actions, once he had unwound, was to write an account of his adventure for sale to *McClure's*, which later became *Adrift on an Ice Pan*. He erected plaques commemorating the unfortunate dogs in St. Anthony, and at Mostyn House, the school owned by his family in England, where his "Dear Old Mum" lived with his elder brother. The patient survived.

This brief crisis displayed Grenfell's restless energy; his capacity for physical endurance; his tendency to treat life as sport (when rescued he was wearing rugby socks and shorts); his gifts as a propagandist; and, less attractively, his impetuosity and irresponsibility. The mission very much depended on Grenfell at this stage of its development, and his death could have severely damaged it. He did not have to go on the journey to Canada Bay – other doctors were available – and he certainly should not have taken the chance of crossing Hare Bay on rotten ice. The rescue put other lives at risk. But Grenfell was neither introspective nor self-critical. Instead of writing a *culpa mea*, he transformed a bungled dogsled journey into what Rompkey aptly calls an heroic survival narrative. Grenfell, the rescuers, the dogs – all became heroes, participants in a parable of Christian fortitude and resignation: "As I went to sleep that first night [after rescue] there still rang in my ears the same verse of the old hymn which had been my companion on the ice, 'Thy will, not mine, O Lord.'"

Adrift on an Ice Pan crystallized what made Grenfell such an attractive figure, and helps explain why he was lionized on both sides of the Atlantic. Here was the sporting, manly, uncomplicated Christian public school product, the muscular missionary, the selfless doctor devoted to "his people" (and his dogs),

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braving the bitter northern weather, risking his life gladly for others in a remote, wild, poverty-stricken corner of the Empire. It was an unbeatable, exotic image with a unique twist: for Grenfell was not serving “lesser breeds without the law” but, as he frequently reminded his audiences, Anglo-Saxon seafarers, the backbone of the race.² The image received a powerful boost from the contemporary American fascination with the northern wilderness, and with polar regions in general – it was the age, after all, of Nansen, Amundsen, Scott, Cook and, above all, Peary, who stopped on several occasions at Battle Harbour, where there was a Grenfell hospital, on his way to and from the high Arctic. It was an image nourished also by Grenfell’s supporters, the press, and by Grenfell himself, who was a skilled and energetic self-publicist.

One of the great virtues of Rompkey’s biography is its consciousness of the gap between man and image, and his book provides enough detailed evidence and commentary to allow the reader to size up Grenfell for what he actually was. This is a significant departure from the numerous earlier biographies, most of which repeated each other in hagiographical prose. The best and most recent of them was by Lennox Kerr, but even that was carefully respectful.³ Still, it has to be noted that Rompkey’s title, *Grenfell of Labrador*, is firmly in the old tradition. Indeed, it was the title of the first biography, published in 1908.⁴ Grenfell never spent a winter in Labrador, and the mission’s work there was largely directed to livyers and visiting fishermen on the southern part of the coast. Grenfell was not primarily interested in the native peoples who lived in northern Labrador, and was content to leave the Inuit in the care of the Moravians – which did not stop him from criticizing the missionaries, or from using the Inuit for photo opportunities. “Like birds and other animals,” he once wrote, “the worthwhile Eskimo needs sanctuaries if he is to survive.”⁵ His business was with the Anglo-Saxons. Grenfell of the Straits? of Newfoundland? Somehow these alternatives lack an heroic, imperial resonance. But title apart, Rompkey has written a meticulously researched, intelligent and well-crafted biography that will be the standard work for years to come. There is plenty of room for other studies of Grenfell and his mission: but this biography will serve as the starting point.

In his day (and since), Grenfell inspired strong emotions – admiration, devotion, frustration, dislike. Unless they are careful, biographers can similarly take sides. Rompkey’s approach is appropriately cool, detached and even-handed. He records the opinions of others, allows the facts he has recorded to speak for themselves, and through this process of selection, supplemented by some judicious commentary, gives a more rounded portrait of Grenfell than any previous biographer. It is not, however, one of those biographies which records its subject’s every action and every thought. No doubt urged on by his publisher, Rompkey had to make difficult choices about what to omit. This is a pity, since Grenfell was a sufficiently important figure to have deserved a very full and detailed biography.

There is, for instance, much interesting detail about Grenfell's English family background, but by comparison relatively little about his own American family. Like many Englishmen of his class, Grenfell had grown up in a predominantly male environment. Imbued with puritanical ideas of service and chivalry, and often games-mad, men of his upbringing and background tended to see women either as objects to be revered, or as simply irrelevant. Grenfell seemed destined to become one of the many bachelors scattered across the Edwardian empire, until in 1909 he found himself married to Anne MacClanahan of Chicago, a determined woman half his age, after a whirlwind romance on a transatlantic steamer. This was the year after the ice pan escapade, when Grenfell had stared mortality in the face, and the two events are surely connected. His subsequent family life was hardly conventional. Anne Grenfell did not take to St. Anthony or Labrador or to her husband's eccentric personal habits, and very soon established a home base in New England to balance their "Castle" in St. Anthony. Nevertheless, she introduced an element of businesslike order into Grenfell's somewhat chaotic life, and in effect became his manager. The children grew up largely on their own, and husband and wife were often apart. There is no doubt that the Grenfells were devoted to each other, but one wishes that Rompkey had told us more. It cannot always have been an easy relationship.

Rompkey asserts that Grenfell is best understood not as a missionary, but as a social reformer. In this period, so J.A. Mangan argues, most gentlemanly evangelical missionaries would have held that there was no distinction. Their task was twofold: to spread both the Gospel and western values and civilization. "The Christian missionaries symbolized God in *action*. Their skills were practical as well as spiritual: medicine, agriculture, handicrafts and printing were typical accomplishments, [and] teaching"⁶ The difference in Grenfell's case was that he had no heathen to convert. He was working among an at least nominally Christian people, for a society – the Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen – which had always mixed evangelism with practical, direct social action. Thus in Newfoundland and Labrador, Grenfell's work tended more and more to emphasize the importance of reforming and modernizing, according to his standards and preconceptions, a backward colonial society. This secular trend was accelerated by the medical emphasis of the work, by personnel who often did not share Grenfell's religious views, and by reliance on American supporters – generous philanthropists, but rarely religious enthusiasts.

The agency through which Grenfell worked was his mission, which in the early years at least was very much an extension of his personality and priorities, and reflected his ideas and assumptions about what needed to be changed in Newfoundland society. Some of his initiatives were imaginative and constructive, others insensitive and badly thought out. If there is a weakness in this book, it is that Rompkey devotes insufficient space to these initiatives and to the work of the mission as a whole, and does not provide the critical assessment that they

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deserve. The establishment of a sawmilling settlement at Roddickton, a remarkably brave step, is not mentioned. The King George V Institute in St. John's receives relatively brief attention. The co-operative stores are discussed, but there is no consideration of their appropriateness to rural Newfoundland at that time – whether this was in fact the best way to tackle the inequities of the credit system. The attempt to introduce reindeer was an extraordinary business, a failure which deserved more extensive critical analysis than Rompkey provides since it was, like the ice pan, symbolic both of the man and the mission. Who else but Grenfell would have had the imagination, the energy and the nerve? Who else would have assumed that Newfoundlanders could become Lapps? The nagging question, in short, is what difference did Grenfell actually make?

But all authors have to make choices, and publishers impose additional constraints. Rompkey's primary concern is with Grenfell the man, and in discussing the mission he makes the essential point that it was a colony within a colony, staffed almost entirely by well-meaning but often patronizing outsiders, even much of the manual work being done for free during the summers by usually jolly, but sometimes disillusioned Ivy League students. For all its social objectives, the separation of the mission from the Newfoundland government and the colonial elite – and even from Newfoundland society as a whole – is very striking. There were local well-wishers, of course, and until the 1920s Grenfell always stayed at Government House when visiting St. John's, but relations were constantly strained by his exaggerated, condescending lecture circuit portrayals of a backward society mired in poverty and disease, ruled by an incompetent, exploitative upper class. He had a low opinion of virtually all Newfoundland politicians (Richard Squires in particular), attacked the churches for supporting denominationalism and neglecting Labrador, and criticized the merchants for cheating the fishermen. He made virtually no attempt to recruit Newfoundlanders as professional staff members, thus depriving himself of local allies, collaborators and advisors. Grenfell was then hurt, angered and puzzled when people in St. John's were at times less than enthusiastic about his activities, and insufficiently grateful. American, British, and a few Canadian doctors and nurses ran the mission, and donors in those countries paid the bills. As the years passed, Grenfell spent most of his time in the United States and mission territory, visiting St. John's very infrequently. When he went briefly to France during the First World War, it was with an American unit, not the Newfoundland Regiment, whose men he did not visit. It is just as well he was not appointed governor in the early 1930s, as some urged.

The mission rather than the man is the subject of Patricia O'Brien's anthology, *The Grenfell Obsession*. This is a well-designed, copiously illustrated book, intended to recognize the contribution of all those attracted to northern Newfoundland and Labrador by the Grenfell mission. The extracts, selected from the enormous literature spawned by the mission, are intelligently chosen and

introduced. The preface, which raises some interesting questions, is far too short. There is a critical edge to this anthology – documentary history might be a better description – which sets it apart from the usual centenary volume. It conveys very well the mission's hearty ethos of service and adventure, and does indeed recognize the work of the doctors and nurses who actually lived and worked in mission territory, often isolated for long periods in difficult conditions, a few of them eventually making it their home. Settlers and fishermen saw far more of these people than they did of Grenfell, a man in perpetual motion, whose presence was seasonal. At the same time, the book provides a brief history of Grenfell and the mission. There are pieces by transient WOPs⁷, by doctors and nurses, by visitors and by Grenfell himself. A few locals are represented – could more use have been made of *Them Days* ? – among them Millicent Loder, the only Labradorian before 1949 to become a Grenfell nurse.

In 1929 Loder went to work as a servant at the North West River hospital. There she experienced at first hand the very different culture of the mission “outsiders” – separate food, their rooms cleaned and warmed up, dressing for dinner, and what seems to have struck her most, butter balls. The doctor in charge at that time was Harry L. Paddon, an Englishman who had founded the hospital in 1915. After his premature death in 1939, first his wife and then a son, Dr. Tony Paddon, kept the operation going until 1978. The Paddons ran the Grenfell mission in Labrador north of the Straits. They were able to cooperate effectively with the Moravians – who had very mixed feelings about Grenfell – and were largely responsible for laying the foundation of a health care system which was in time to stretch from Cartwright to Nain. This was only effected by dedication and determination, as Tony Paddon's autobiography, *Labrador Doctor*, makes very clear.

This is an engaging memoir, with plenty of Labrador yarns. But there is sufficient discussion of his professional life to give the reader a good sense of how the mission changed during his career. Paddon recalls an apparently idyllic childhood in Labrador – confirmed by his brother Harold⁸ – followed by schooling in the United States. He returned to the mission after the Second World War, first to work at St. Anthony with Grenfell's successor as superintendent, the gruff Dr. Charles Curtis, before taking charge at North West River in 1947. It was not an easy transition. Curtis was first and foremost a doctor, not a social worker, and believed not only that medical work should be centralized in St. Anthony, but that the northern stations (which he very rarely visited) should be phased out altogether. Mrs. Paddon had been at odds with him during the war, when she ran North West River single-handed with little support from St. Anthony. There was, Paddon says, a clear division between those who thought like Curtis, and those who followed the broader vision of Grenfell himself. It was Paddon's contribution to help resolve the contradiction, in alliance with Curtis' successor, Dr. Gordon Thomas. The solution they chose – not that they had much choice –

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was modernization, collaboration, and integration with a wider society. There could then be high standards of professional medical care, as well as other services which could effect a genuine social transformation. The price, which they may not have foreseen, was the end of the mission as a major independent force in northern Newfoundland and Labrador. The Moravian Mission experienced similar changes under the leadership of the Rev. F.W. Peacock, who became superintendant in 1941.⁹

Though Paddon represented a Labrador tradition, he was North American and a pragmatist. Peacock was neither German nor from an old Moravian family, and may have been chosen as superintendant because he would make an effective mediator between the mission and government authorities. Thomas, a Montreal-trained surgeon, had a genuine missionary enthusiasm, but was a dedicated professional, and well able to view the Grenfell operation with detachment. He took over at St. Anthony in 1954, and as superintendant in 1959. In loose coalition, the Grenfell and Moravian missions embarked on a process of gradual decolonization which was very much in the spirit of the postwar world. Both of them actively supported Newfoundland's entry into the Canadian confederation, and became allied to the Liberal regime of J.R. Smallwood. The Grenfell Mission in particular profited enormously from the influx of federal funds, which enabled it to expand significantly in northern Labrador. This was not the mission set apart but the mission as collaborator, and Gordon Thomas is quite frank about the process in his interesting autobiography, *From Sled to Satellite*.

In 1949, just as Newfoundland became a province, Nurse Dorothy Jupp sent an appeal to Smallwood to prevent starvation in southern Labrador. Smallwood immediately made the necessary arrangements, and Thomas flew up to Mary's Harbour with a load of food. "This incident began what was to prove a rewarding association with the premier" writes Thomas, "from now on I had ready access to his office. He gave me his unlisted phone number so that I could call him when I wished, and I always got a friendly response. This relationship meant a great deal to me in the years ahead." (49-50) Thomas was a good politician. In 1962 he decided, after an unfavourable assessment of St. Anthony, that a new hospital was needed. If he could persuade the government to pay for it, then the rather conservative Grenfell board could not turn it down. So he flew to St. John's "and requested a meeting with Premier Smallwood." Smallwood told him to see Arthur Lundrigan, the Liberals' favourite lease-back contractor, and in 1964 construction began. A practical partnership had been forged, very different from Grenfell's dealings with Newfoundland politicians. The problem was, of course, that the relationship was partisan, and when Smallwood finally left office in 1972, once open doors began to shut.

It was time, in any case, to end an anachronistic relationship between the provincial government, which now paid the bills, and a private mission. To his credit, Thomas understood what had to happen, and was backed up by Paddon.

With due deliberation and negotiation, the Grenfell Association handed over its local assets and its responsibilities to the provincial government, and Paddon and Thomas retired. By 1984 Grenfell Association work on “the coast” had ended. As for the Moravian Mission, it had long before transferred its headquarters from Nain to Happy Valley – a highly symbolic decision – and divested itself of responsibility for health and education.

Grenfell knew before his death in 1940 that his mission was in the process of becoming something very different from the casual, highly personal institution which had best reflected his own personality. Rompkey writes well about the strains of Grenfell’s sad last years, when he was plagued by heart disease, deeply upset by his wife’s illness and early death, and unhappy at being forced to play an increasingly marginal role in mission affairs. It is a pity that he did not live to see the changes which the 1950s brought to Newfoundland and Labrador, which both Paddon and Thomas describe. Grenfell had always supported confederation, and his first priority had been the welfare of “our people”. These considerations, I think, would have conditioned his reaction to post-confederation Newfoundland. He would probably have even got on with that other busy man of action, J.R. Smallwood.

Notes

¹Pierre Berton, “The Adventures of Wilfred Grenfell”, in *The Wild Frontier. More Tales from the Remarkable Past* (Toronto 1978), 51-82.

²There are a number of books which help explain the Grenfell image. Two useful ones are J.A. Mangan, *The Games Ethic and Imperialism* (Viking, 1986), particularly chapter 7, “Christ and the Imperial Games Fields: Evangelical Athletes of the Empire”; and Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot. Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven and London 1981).

³J. Lennox Kerr, *Wilfred Grenfell: His Life and Work* (New York 1959).

⁴James Johnston, *Grenfell of Labrador* (London 1908).

⁵W.T. Grenfell, *The Romance of Labrador* (London 1934), 53. Robert Gathorne-Hardy, who visited Labrador in 1920, wrote that while he would not “depreciate the excellent and well publicised doctor, ... for one who has seen the work ... of the Labrador Moravians, there must always be a regret, a resentment even, for the consequent obscurity which has covered their two-centuries’ labours.” *Traveller’s Trio* (London 1963), 55.

⁶Mangan, *Games Ethic*, 169.

⁷The term is usually explained as an acronym for Workers Without Pay. Rompkey (243) shows that it derives from the complaint of a volunteer that the work was fit only for “wops” – Italian labourers.

⁸Harold G. Paddon, *Green Woods and Blue Waters. Memories of Labrador* (St. John’s 1989).

⁹F.W. Peacock, *Reflections from a Snowhouse* (St. John’s 1986).