

The Labradorians: Voices from the Land of Cain. Lynne D. Fitzhugh.

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The Labradorians: Voices from the Land of Cain. Lynne D. Fitzhugh. St. John's: Breakwater Books Ltd., xiii+507 p., maps, photos, glossary, endnotes, bibliog., index and concordance, hardcover, \$49.95, 1999, ISBN 1-55081-148-7.

JAMES K. HILLER

PROFESSIONAL, ACADEMIC HISTORIANS have not been good about keeping the general public informed about what they are up to. Some of them have a conscience about this, but most behave like their colleagues in other disciplines: the primary audience is the profession, and therefore what is written and published will tend to reflect the preoccupations and requirements of peers, rather than what interests the public at large. Social, natural and applied scientists, professors of business, education and kinetics — all are part of the same academic culture.

But History stands alone in one important respect. The past is common to everyone, an intellectual open-access resource, and there is a widespread assumption that anyone can “do history” — that it is not a difficult or recondite subject. The “Local Interest” shelves of bookstores in Newfoundland and elsewhere are filled with memoirs and community and family histories, evidence of a huge public interest in the past. Academics in other disciplines than History see no problem in trying to write it themselves, but would be mightily offended if historians tried to write Anthropology or Economics. Such squabbles aside, the fact is that History is more open to the amateur than any other discipline. And if professional historians do not produce readable material for the public, then amateurs will.

Lynne Fitzhugh's *The Labradorians* is superior amateur history based on an excellent idea: to use the narratives published in *Them Days* magazine as the core of what might be called a people's history of Labrador up to 1941, when construc-

tion began on the airfield at Goose Bay. That event, by common agreement, marks the end of old Labrador. To warrant inclusion, narratives had to be “palpable Labrador talking” (vii), and Fitzhugh arranged her selections in regional groupings, beginning with the Straits and ending with Nitassinan, each with an introductory essay. The collection is framed by a brief history of Labrador at the beginning, and an (unintroduced) group of narratives describing early days at Goose Bay at the end. This is a personal book, as the Epilogue makes abundantly clear, and an obvious labour of love.

There are problems with Fitzhugh’s approach. Most of the narrators — as she says — were born between 1890 and 1920. As a result, though stories and traditions reach back into the 19th century or beyond, most of the accounts deal with the first half of the 20th century. Some effort is made to extend the perspective — with extracts from George Cartwright’s diary, for example — but the imbalance remains. Secondly, Inuit and Innu narrators are in the minority: white, Settler and Metis voices dominate the text. In the chapter on what is called “The Moravian Coast” (Nain to Cape Harrison), for example, only two Inuit voices appear. The ratio may well reflect the contents of *Them Days*, but it does create an inaccurate impression of who were — and are — Labradorians.

A further, and significant problem with the narratives, compelling as many of them are, is the virtual absence of annotation. At a minimum the reader needs to know when the narrative was recorded, the age of the narrator or author, and the time period to which he or she is referring. The unexplained references at the end of each *Them Days* extract are not enough. Susan Martin’s narrative (p. 209), for example, contains the phrases “When I was a child,” “Those days,” and “When I was a young girl.” To what periods is she referring? Alex Turnbull (p. 114) talks about when he was ten years old — when was that? Those who already know something about Labrador can make informed estimates; those who do not will be at a significant disadvantage.

The decision to organize the extracts on a geographical basis is understandable, and certainly reflects contemporary and historical realities. But the division obscures the interconnectedness of the different parts of Labrador, and also militates against the reader obtaining a sense of the larger processes of change over time which have affected the whole peninsula. A chronological approach might have been problematic with this material, but not impossible. It is difficult to keep in mind, as one moves from region to region, the broader themes discussed in the first chapter, which provides a quick overall narrative. It is entitled “The Land God Gave to Cain,” an overused and derogatory epithet (also used in the book’s subtitle) which I for one would like to see retired.¹

The writing of an historical synthesis — which Fitzhugh has to do here, and in each regional introduction — is difficult at the best of times. It demands generalisations, discrimination, and great care, and a good command of the relevant sources. In the case of Labrador, no one has attempted a general history since W.G.

Gosling.² Specialized research is available, but most of it is by social scientists who, it must be said, do not always make good historians. So Fitzhugh had the challenging task of trying to make sense for the first time of a diffuse and uneven modern literature.

She has read widely, but even so the bibliography shows some significant gaps — for example Sean Cadigan on Battle Harbour, Alan Cooke on the early history of the Hudson's Bay Company, Hans Rollmann on the Moravians, Garth Taylor on Inuit historical anthropology, Shannon Ryan on the Labrador fishery, and Ronald Rompkey's biography of Grenfell. It is also a pity that Fitzhugh does not appear to have used the relevant entries, often very useful, in the *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador* and the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. Wider consultations than those indicated in the Acknowledgements would have probably prevented these omissions, and also caught some at least of the errors that have crept into the text. For example, Fitzhugh seems somewhat at sea with the admittedly complicated boundary question, having missed Staveley and Budgel's neat and authoritative pamphlet on the subject. The history of Killiney is misunderstood. The Moravians traded with the Inuit from the beginning, and did not delay until the 1780s (p. 198). The "great awakening" among the Inuit began not at Okak, but at Hopedale (p. 41). The United Church of Canada only came into existence in 1925 (p. 323). Sir John Hope Simpson had no connection with the Labrador Development Company (p. 108).

The Labradorians leaves something to be desired as history, but it should be taken as an ambitious, romantic exercise and not as scholarly exegesis. In the early 20th century, British and especially American "outsiders" were attracted to Labrador as an accessible yet semi-unknown wilderness, encouraged northwards by Grenfell's relentless propaganda. The philanthropic and imaginative links created at that time between northern Newfoundland, Labrador and New England still persist, and without American financial support this handsome volume would never have appeared. In this sense, *The Labradorians* is a monument to a longstanding and generally positive relationship. It is also a welcome and overdue attempt to make Labrador's history accessible to a wide readership, though a paperback edition would greatly assist that objective. The narratives — even without annotation — are absorbing, and make this a book to which one can frequently return.

"Doing history" is not easy, as Lynne Fitzhugh has, I think, found out. But she deserves credit and thanks for producing a book whose wide and generous sweep provides a good introduction to Labrador and its people, and helps explain the difficulties which face them today. Professional historians have become in recent years ever more concerned with specialised detail, with social rather than political categories, and have been placed on the defensive by the post-modernist assertion that "we can not know the true meaning of the past."³ *The Labradorians* should remind them, myself included, that outside academia and its arcane discontents,

people believe that history is important to their lives. No professional historian would have attempted what Fitzhugh has done. Why not?

Notes

¹I am also surprised that a Newfoundland publisher would allow the use of the term "Newfy." (pp. 40, 105)

²W.G. Gosling. *Labrador: Its Discovery, Exploration, and Development*. London: Alston Rivers, 1910.

³Alan Munslow. *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies*. London: Routledge, 2000.