

Ronald Rompkey, ed. *The Labrador Memoir of Dr. Harry Paddon, 1912-1938.*

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Ronald Rompkey, ed. *The Labrador Memoir of Dr Harry Paddon, 1912-1938*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003, ISBN 0-7735-2505-X

HARRY PADDON QUALIFIED as a physician and surgeon in 1911 after studying at St. Thomas's Hospital. Coming from a devoutly religious family, he had already served a term with the Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen, signalling his response to needy labour. Pursuing this compassionate life-view, Paddon responded to a call from the Grenfell Mission for a public health officer on the Labrador coast. He continued his arduous work there from 1912 until his death in 1939.

In 1938, he prepared a memoir of his experiences and it is this manuscript here published under the editorship of Ronald Rompkey. The latter, in his Introduction, provides a helpful introduction to life in Labrador almost a century ago, and also relates the provenance of the memoir. This he synthesizes efficiently as "a narrative of northern adventure experienced by an itinerant doctor going about his district in challenging circumstances" (xlii).

And "challenging" is the critical word here. As a description of grim winter dog-sled trips, unbelievably foul weather, inspired improvisations, and remarkable courage both by patients all over Labrador and by their physician (the last understated), this memoir cannot be bettered. Paddon made winter medical rounds over hundreds of miles and several weeks duration, in appalling weather — blizzards that sometimes kept him in a tiny cabin or an overcrowded igloo for days or even weeks. In the summer he endured lengthy journeys on foot, braving myriads of biting and stinging insects, or travelled by small ship, risking a wreck during all too frequent raging storms. On occasion, one of a surgeon's duties was to keep the thousands of mosquitos waved away from a patient's face while she awoke from her anaesthetic.

Paddon's interests were by no means narrowly medical. He was concerned with the poverty of so many of the Labradorians and their isolation from schools and churches. Consequently, he helped establish boarding schools for the local children, bringing them in from long distances, thereby providing large enough classes to justify the expense of paying salaries for teachers from "the Outside." He was, moreover, highly sympathetic to the plight of the native population of Labrador. He found them not noble savages, but rather "listless, tuberculous-looking, European-clothed specimens of a race almost exterminated by white man's diseases and white man's interference with their natural means of livelihood" (26). He also believed that the uncontaminated Eskimos were as near to Utopia as anything the world contains. Of course, to Paddon, the key word is "uncontaminated." Having seen the actuality, he attempted to help, and to encourage others, particularly government, to act. To some degree Paddon succeeded.

In reading Paddon's memoir, it is helpful to keep in mind that it is just that — a memoir — written at the end of the doctor's career. One consequence is that Paddon

sometimes succumbs to purple passages that might not have appeared in a journal. One short instance is his account of being perched on a hilltop, “fascinated to watch part of a round in the age-long battle between King Neptune’s created warriors and the rocky defences of the Labrador coast” (21). And so on, for a lengthy paragraph. With occasional exceptions such as this, however, the prose is straightforward and direct and eminently readable.

Harry Paddon was raised in a family actively pursuing, as well as professing, Christianity. Church visits were frequent and alms-giving generous and common. Thus his bent, in Labrador, was to promote similar activities as best he could. But he was always a Christian physician, not a medical missionary, and typically suggested that Christianity “needs diluting with a little common sense and honesty” (27).

There are minor annoyances in the text, largely related to Paddon forgetting that not every reader would be familiar with Labradorian and naval usages. “Short lop” remains a puzzle till looked up. Similarly “spread on the bawn” (101) was mysterious, as was the frequent use of “tickle,” as in the “Main Tickle tidal rattle” (107). “Wilson’s tilt” is cryptic. “Ballicatters” (76) escapes even the *Oxford English Dictionary*, although Paddon reports this word as being a corruption of “barri-cades.” The editor might have been more helpful in some of these matters.

My chief criticism of the book, to be shared, perhaps, between Rompkey and the Press, is the absence of an index. Such failure is reprehensible and an unnecessary burden to scholarship. The fault has occurred all too often in recent decades.

Nevertheless, I can recommend Dr. Paddon’s memoir as a fascinating read. Fortunately, the strenuous and dangerous lifestyle he describes so convincingly is no longer a necessary component of outpost medical practice.

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