

LABRADOR, A READER'S GUIDE. By ROBIN MCGRATH. St. John's: Memorial University Press, 2023. ISBN 9781778219313. 261 p., index, bib., notes. Softbound. Cdn\$22.95.

Labrador, a Reader's Guide is a small volume described by McGrath as “a book about books about Labrador” (p. 3). Comfortable in the hand and with clear typescript, it is also well written, well designed, and carefully edited. It consists of a compilation of short essays previously published in newspapers and magazines in Newfoundland and Labrador between 2000 and 2017. Two longer essays finish the volume, one of which presents the author's thoughts on Labrador's diarist tradition. The second essay covers a topic that history researchers of Labrador's southeast coast have puzzled over for years, namely Lambert de Boileau and whether his *Recollections of Labrador Life*, first published in 1861 (1969), was based on his own observations or was cleverly put together using others' accounts and whether the name of the author (of whom little is known) was a pseudonym. McGrath presented this paper to the Newfoundland and Labrador Historical Society in early 2023; having it in print will ensure a useful foundation for future historical sleuthing.

Before even opening the volume, I was drawn to the spruce-green cover with the word “Labrador” in the title and the playful image of a hare in the guise of Captain George Cartwright (a *Lepus cartwrighti*, perhaps?). The dedication page to Canadian playwright James Reaney further resonated, as several of his plays were premiered in the 1970s by a member of my extended family. On these four notes, I began reading a book that almost immediately proved compelling and thought provoking, with entertaining bits throughout.

Few writers have the privilege of seeing their shorter works republished in book form. This particular effort was a good idea, if only to offer an overview of a sample of Labrador-related publications. Many texts about Labrador are timeless and have held rapt a continuous albeit diverse readership as far back as the 16th century, when Basque sailing rutters and insurance records were read with great attention. In the 18th century, French and British colonial records had their following, as did Moravian mission diaries, countless explorers' narratives, and of course George Cartwright (1792).

McGrath's essays consider works dating from the 19th century onwards. Many of them are about familiar texts—but familiarity makes these essays neither redundant nor boring. More than 60 authors are considered—academic and popular, historical and contemporary—with McGrath offering fresh opinions and new facts from her own research or personal ties with the figures and contexts she writes about. The writing has an even cadence with sentences and thoughts unfurling in a way that makes this work very readable. There are only a few instances of correction but these do not take away from the whole: (1) contrary to what is written on page 111, archaeologists have not, in fact,

confirmed Inuit presence as far south as Placentia Bay; (2) there is no direct connection between Inuit and much earlier Dorset, such that Inuit in southernmost Labrador were not “Dorset hunters and traders” (p. 145); and (3) some Innu, moreover, developed ties with Catholicism before the 19th and 20th centuries (p. 196) at the Musquaro and Tadoussac missions that were established along the Quebec North Shore by the early 1700s. In addition, the comparison of Innu and Irish (p. 115) is difficult to parse with its uncomfortable national character stereotyping.

The individual essays follow a book-review format of providing summary and recommendation. Where they sparkle and make for rich reading is in satisfying opening and closing sentences, and especially in the evaluations. These are pitch-perfect and even teacherly (“What a pity about the errors,” p. 168), with some authors advised as to what they really ought to have written, how they might have written it, and what a “proper editor” would have done ... if only they had had one (p. 35). One charged review closes with the succinct, “Gimlette has already had more hours of my time than he deserves” (p. 175). At the praiseworthy end of the spectrum are many works such as Liverman (2007) on avalanches, Bruneau (2004) on icebergs, MacDonald's *Very Rough Country* (2010), Byrne's and Fouillard's *It's Like the Story* (2000), and the Hind brothers' expedition up the Moisie River first published in 1863 (2007). McGrath's volume belongs in this latter category of good reads that should be on what she describes as your no-you-can't-borrow-it bookshelf (p.133).

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