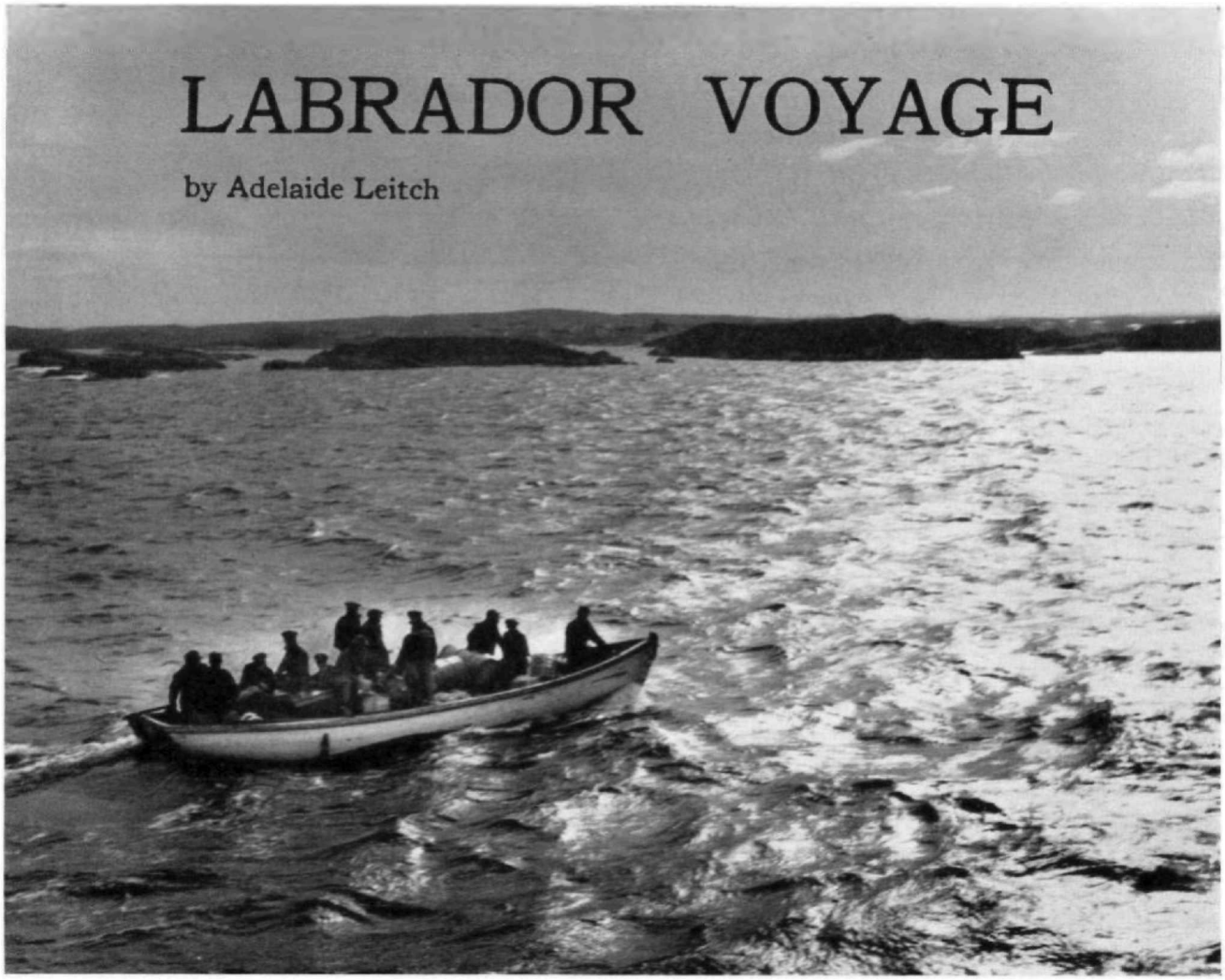
LABRADOR VOYAGE

by Adelaide Leitch



Their boat loaded with supplies from the steamer, these fisherman on the coast of Labrador head for shore and the protected cove where they have left their schooner.

ANCHORED well out from the shore, the *Kyle* must have looked a little like a duck gathering her ducklings. We stood at the rail of that trim coastal steamer from St. John's, Newfoundland—"the ship that never ties up in Labrador"—and, in the chill grayness of a Labrador dawn, saw the small boats converging toward us from the settlement of Cartwright, our twenty-fifth port of call.

Indian, settler and fisherman were coming to collect provisions and mail and news to last them for another two weeks and the next northbound trip of the *Kyle*. Someone had ordered new nets from St. John's. . . . Someone else came alongside while a length of lumber was lifted from the yawning maw of the steamer and lowered over the side. . . . Two fishermen in oilskins and rubber boots ran light-footed as cats along the rocking gunwales from one boat to another and climbed on board to ask Captain Edward O'Keefe about the fishing conditions farther south.

It was a queston of vital importance, for, as long as the cod were running, in good weather and bad, the fishermen of Labrador would be out tending their nets and jigging their cod. For the settler population of Labrador—as well as for the floater fleets that come north each summer from Newfoundland—fish means life.

Our mail boat dropped into the water with a muffled plop and, propelled by its strong-armed crew at the oars, sped away toward the Hudson's Bay side of the harbour where the red ensign with its distinctive "HB.C." initials floated over the store and post office. The deep, roomy boat of the Grenfell Mission took on passengers, after the barrels of clothing donated in far-away cities and the boxes of supplies ordered in St. John's had been stowed away. There would be two hours' stop at this "capital of the Labrador," which, although village-sized, was the largest settlement on the coast.

We were breakfastless and shivering, at an hour when the temperature seemed stuck at 45 degrees, and we must have looked a little dumbfounded when an old Cartwright settler helped us ashore, and then took his pipe from between his teeth long enough to remark that they had been sweltering in a heat wave of 104 degrees only three days before our arrival.

"Oh sure," he grinned, "they're typical up here—changes like that!"

Ordinarily, no one would have been about at that hour, but the *Kyle* had the prerogative of upsetting all other routines whenever she arrived at one of her many ports of call between the Straits of Belle Isle and Hopedale.

Cartwright had one of Labrador's few hospitals, along with an excellent school and an industrial shop stocked with the deerskin moccasins and jackets, the Grenfell cloth coats, and the carved ivory famous now not only in Canada but in far corners of the world. The tiny garden, even to us and at that sleepy hour, had a luxuriant look about it that we had not expected to see after some of the rocky fishing coves in which we had anchored—inhospitable, windswept coves harbouring "settlements" of two or three fishing homes isolated from the rest of Labrador.

From the Straits of Belle Isle to Saglek Bay in the north, it is a fight for survival against the coast itself for many of the fisher folk. At Battle Harbour, our first stop north of the straits, we had felt the isolation of the small, unpainted houses, although the port was a well-used one and the settlement had one of the important Marconi stations of the coast. We rowed ashore past a small island with its palisaded enclosure for the dogs, and we landed at the fish landing and storage hut—a spindle-legged erection on the water's edge, with a dusky interior and mound upon mound of salted cod awaiting shipment to market. A little girl and her husky pup eyed us curiously from one doorstep, but her mother came to the door, drying her hands on her faded apron, and offering us the hospitality of her small home. Visitors were welcome, for visitors were few in summer, and they came only by dog team in winter.

Between Battle Harbour and Cartwright, we saw fishing on a giant scale at the whaling station of Hawke's Harbour. There was no doubt about our approach, for the odour of departed whales clung not only to the whaling station itself but to the whole harbour and for some distance out.

Six of the Atlantic giants had been hauled up that day on the slimy, blood-spattered runway, cut in pieces and piled into huge, blackened ovens. To our dismay, nothing remained of them but the piles of gills on the landing stage, mounds of baked skins and bones ground up for fertilizer, and the whale oil that was still trickling along the dark troughs.

Over four hundred and sixty whales had been taken the previous year, a whaling man told us—blue whales, finbacks and the occasional sperm whale. Harpooned by four busy little whaling boats, they had been pumped full of air to prevent their sinking, and then had been picked up by the fifth boat of the whaling fleet—a radar-equipped corvette which lashed them alongside with heavy chains and towed them to harbour.

Shoes were left outside most of the cabins that night—and portholes opened where room occupants had returned triumphantly with four-inch teeth from a sperm whale or sets of whale ears—which added nothing whatever to shipboard air-conditioning.

As the *Kyle* moved up the rocky coast with its 4,500 scattered inhabitants, we saw a Labrador sometimes as gracious as morning coffee from a silver tray, sometimes as stark and lonely as a single fishing shanty on a windswept shore. When the fog cleared, the distant blue hills seemed to stretch on endlessly. The ocean was a vast, island-dotted expanse that contained only ourselves, the occasional fishing schooner that, sails set, sped by to its rendezvous with the cod, and sometimes an iceberg as enchanting as a small castle with minarets of snow.

The schooners kept their appointments with us at regular ports of call or, less frequently, hailed us en route. A dory would come bouncing over the water, and over the side would go the barrels of oil, the boxes of supplies, the vital packets of mail. The *Kyle's* mail was cached away in a regular railway post office amidships and in three sections of pigeon holes—"foreign," "coastal," and "schooner" mail marked only with the name of the fishing ship and the vast address, "Labrador."

One morning, we went on deck to find that the pitching of the boat had given way to a gentle vibration, and that the bleak rocks were miraculously replaced by trees. From pretty little Rigolet on, the Hamilton Inlet for ninety miles clothed itself with green vegetation and the water of the inlet became finally as smooth and reflecting as a mill-pond.

Our destination was Northwest River, port of call only twice a year, and nearest point to internationally famous Goose Bay Airport. Like Cartwright, it was a settlement of red and white, with the Hudson's Bay Company,

The author went as far north as Nain, calling at Northwest River on the way and changing from the steamer to a schooner at Hopedale.

Grenfell Mission and Newfoundland Ranger Station the big three. But Northwest River also had a distinction of its own—the "Garden of Labrador" they called it because of the flowers that bloomed easily in its pretty gardens, because weather changes were not so violent as on the coast and the growing season was normally a week or two ahead of parts of Newfoundland much farther south.

At the dock in Northwest River rocked one of the most famous boats of the coast—the Grenfell hospital ship *Maraval*, equipped and ready for its summer trip. Its doctor, young Dr. Tony Paddon, would pull teeth, set broken bones and be obstetrician as far north as Indian, Eskimo or white man could live on the coast—and he would repeat the trip again in winter, but by dog team.

The people of Northwest River revere the name of Paddon. On a pretty hillside in the settlement, they were building a monument to Tony's father, Dr. Harry Paddon, who was buried there and had been called "another Grenfell." The monument was to be topped by a four-foot piece of uncut labradorite—the same stone used in jewellery in St. John's.

What endeared Northwest River to us probably more than anything else was the square dance the people had been planning for us ever since they had heard the *Kyle* was on the way. The gas lantern that lighted the little hall hung perilously close to the low ceiling, and it had no cover. The black, pot-bellied stove in the centre seemed to vibrate a little each time the dancers' feet thumped the floor—and they most *decidedly* thumped the floor. We began to look a little wilted, but our hosts and hostesses were barely winded.

In one square, dancing with an effortless ease we could not match, was the khaki-coated Newfoundland ranger—one of the eleven officers policing the whole of Labrador. On the other side of the stove a lady from New York was dancing with the captain's teen-aged son, and a be-whiskered settler was spinning a Newfoundland girl so quickly her feet barely brushed the floor. The "orchestra" was two violins and an accordion.

Presently we became aware that the room was filling up. One by one, the Indians from the encampment across the river had slipped inside, and now there they sat, grinning broadly. Gradually it dawned on us—they were watching the white people making fools of themselves! Their amusement was all too evident.

They had been disappointed Indians when we had met them earlier in the day. This trip of the *Kyle* usually brought them their priest from Newfoundland, and it was for him, not for us, that they had come silently out of the hinterlands of Labrador and pitched their tents on the beach. Once a year, this little band of about one hundred Montagnais Indians comes to meet their Roman Catholic "father" who preaches services in their one permanent building, a wooden church, performs marriages and buries the dead—and passes out a few apples and oranges to the littlest Indians.

Our own tribute to those same brown little boys took the form of chocolate bars—our "fare" for being paddled across to the encampment where their elders watched our tour of inspection, accommodatingly stretched a sealskin on a frame for us, and a little shyly offered a few hand-made articles of their own.

The Eskimos did not begin to appear until we were well north of Hamilton Inlet—a few at Makkovik, but in greater numbers at Hopedale, northern terminus of the *Kyle*. They beamed at us, the little ones smiling a trifle shyly and looking embarrassed if anyone asked them, "Do you speak English?" Practically all of them did.

The familiar mission of the Grenfell Association had been left behind now. It was an older and a religious mission at Hopedale (as at Makkovik)—*Unitas Fratrum* or, as it is better known, the Moravian Mission.

The familiar Hudson's Bay Company building now housed the government owned Northern Labrador Trading Operations which, in 1942, had taken over six H B C posts in Labrador and set up a scheme of rehabilitation for the Eskimo. But the Newfoundland ranger station still flaunted its Union Jack to indicate that the man of the law was in residence.

At Hopedale, where the *Kyle* turned south again, I transferred to the *Winifred Lee*, a trim little schooner that had crossed the Atlantic to Spain five times in one winter and held the record for such a crossing under sail. Now owned by Captain Joshua Windsor, a man with an O.B.E. for his Labrador work, and captained by his son Earl, the *Lee* is chartered by the government to serve the coast north of the run of the *Kyle*, and carries freight and passengers as far as Saglek Bay.

I travelled on her as far as Nain, along with the superintendent of Moravian Missions and his wife, Rev. and Mrs. F. W. Peacock (homeland, England), and two young American teachers, Mr. and Mrs. W. A. Ogletree, who would teach at the mission and also help set up a radio station in Nain. It was nearly noon when we left, with the sun beating down on blue water and the red roofs of Hopedale. The *Lee* slid closer to the rocks than the *Kyle* had ever dared do, and sidled into every harbour where there lurked a schooner.

We reached Cape Harrigan, which the Newfoundland fishermen claim is the stormiest, foggiest place on the coast, but it belied its reputation—for the moment at least. From there, it was twelve miles out to the Farmyards, rocky islands that mocked their name, for the delivery of a carton of supplies and a handful of mail. Then it was twelve miles back again to Cape Harrigan. And there the fog, curse of the Labrador, was settling over the cape, and the schooner fleet anchored in a protected cove was already looking like a ghost fleet.

After dark, the orange light of flares on deck still lighted the splitting, gutting and salting that was going on board, and the piles of fresh cod on deck. The fish were running, and every man worked late. Over the side went the entrails—even including the pinkish livers—and bloated air sacs still floated on the surface. A stray salmon was tossed aside—later to be brought over to us on the *Winifred Lee* as a contribution to our galley meals.

All next day, the *Lee* lay becalmed, while her two captains squinted at the foggy sky in disgust. The ship's doctor, having taken care of infected fingers and a couple of aching teeth for the schoonermen, moseyed back to the stern, dropped a line and jigger overboard and began fishing for our supper of fresh cod. Next morning, the fog rolled back to give us a panorama of hills becoming higher than the ones we had seen from the *Kyle*, and the crew, rejoicing loudly, weighed anchor, and away we went.

Nain was another of Labrador's red-roofed villages, sitting at the foot of Nain Hill where a little stream called First Brook came trickling down to the ocean. On Second Brook, across the harbour and near the trout net, a snow bridge still spanned the water, although it was mid-July and the bake-apples were ripening on the hills. "*Aksunai!*" called out the Eskimos. Or "Hallo!" It didn't seem to matter which, for contact with the white man had made most of them bilingual. They were happy as kids at the arrival of Rev. Mr. Peacock—their *Angajokak*—the boss, home again after a year's furlough in England.

Sunday in Nain was a church-going Sunday, with the big bell in the green-roofed Moravian steeple pealing a little before ten and the Eskimos—most of them in white people's garb but with their own sealskin boots—trooping in from the Eskimo side of the village.

One old lady, her face as browned and weathered as old leather but with eyes that had many laugh-wrinkles, offered me half her prayer book. The hymns, accompanied by a small organ that was surprisingly sweet, were slow, measured, syllable by syllable with no accent and no inflection. Even a stranger such as I could follow them easily—although I had not the faintest notion what I might be singing.

Someone—it may have been a missionary or a Grenfell doctor—said to me once, "You could stay here in Labrador all your life and still not know all there is to know about it." But I'll say this for that enigmatic country—on my last day in Nain, it seemed bent on showing us as many phases of its life as it possibly could.

Usually only one important ship came in at a time, but presently a stranger appeared—the *Blue Dolphin* with its crew of Americans on a hydrographic survey, and two or three Canadians from Ottawa doing some unofficial geographical surveys of their own. A little later, the hospital ship *Maraval* we had seen in Northwest River slid into Nain Harbour, dropped anchor, and began to lower its dory. It was followed almost immediately by the floating courthouse of the Labrador, the *St. Barbe* with the magistrate who would hear any cases that had accumulated in the past year. And by nightfall, the snug little harbour was fairly bulging with boats.

A Labrador moon rose big and full that night, picking out the masts of the ships in harbour, and I watched it from the bow of the *Winifred Lee*, wondering where I had heard that there was nothing on the Labrador but loneliness and grimness and barren, barren rocks.

Station of the Newfoundland Ranger, left, and one of the better homes, right, at Hopedale, where the Eskimos come to trade. Photos by the author.