

Public Discourses and the Intellectual Origins of Labrador Nationalism

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Abstract. Within the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Labrador has a distinct geographical and cultural identity satisfying many of the conditions of nationhood. In fact, given the ubiquity of nationalist symbolism and discourse in contemporary Labrador, it is easy to overlook how recently the idea of a unified regional public came to be. Its emergence between 1969 and the mid-1970s transformed Labrador society on a scale little short of revolution, chiefly by shifting control over discourse and practical affairs into local hands. Yet this public did not arise suddenly. Rather, it sprang from colonial traditions brought by figures like Wilfred Grenfell, Harry Paddon, and Lester Burry, who supplied not only a model for discourse but also the physical means for communication, through radio and improved transportation networks, while shifting the cultural centre of the region inland and openly advocating for the consolidation of a regional society. It would take twenty years from Confederation for the idea of a Labrador society to become naturalized, with Labradorian intellectualism sped along by unprecedented demographic, economic, social, and technological changes, primarily associated with resource development. Considering pre-1969 public discourses in Labrador, including indigenous, settler, and outsider perspectives, will help us to contextualize, understand, and ultimately to celebrate the sudden rise in Labradorian intellectual and literary output in the early 1970s—an output which produced the basis for our political and national identity today.

Panel Presentation Text

I am here to talk about the origins of nationalism in Labrador—which, despite the title of this morning’s panel, is not part of Newfoundland. But Labrador is not truly a territory of its own, either. Its geographical boundaries have never corresponded with the jurisdiction of a government, and it is also not really a nation, if Benedict Anderson is our guide, because despite showing other tendencies of nationalism, like “boundary-oriented and horizontal” thinking (27), most Labradorians do not imagine their community to be sovereign. Still, Labrador does have a *public*, which social and literary theories of publics can examine.

I date the emergence of that public to the early 70s, when Labradorians began to assume control over local discourse and practical affairs, and established most of the social and cultural institutions that endure in Labrador today. The key moment occurred when Labradorians distinguished themselves more from non-Labradorians than from each other—when, in Michael Warner’s phrase, Labrador became “a social totality”, notionally inclusive of all its members (65).

“Labrador” was not a culturally compelling term, for Labradorians at least, well into the twentieth century. The Innu of Labrador had more in common with the Innu of Quebec than with their Inuit neighbours, for example—and vice-versa—and some of the southern fishing

communities had more in common with Newfoundland than with any of their aboriginal neighbours. (This is all still true, in many contexts.)

In order for people to start thinking of themselves as Labradorians: (1) the idea of “Labradorian” had to be conceived; (2) a collective of Labradorians had to be delineated; and (3) the idea of “Labradorian” had to be communicated to that collective. Labradorians could not become Labradorians until they were addressed as such, first by others and then by themselves. To understand Labrador’s modern history, one must consider how and by whom its people were addressed in the years leading up to the 1970s.

Let me begin at the end. Our literary history of Labrador nationalism culminates with Elizabeth Goudie’s 1973 book *Woman of Labrador*, which settled Labrador literature’s dominant themes and subject matter, its dominant genre, and the choice of the trapper as Labrador’s foundational national myth.

Woman of Labrador divides Labrador into two worlds: the vanishing world of the trappers in which Goudie’s older children were raised, and the new world of wages and technology into which her younger children were born, after the creation of the air force base at Goose Bay. This contrast is the basis for political mobilization.

Many memoirs have followed Goudie’s example, often with assistance from anthropologist editors, but the biggest local proponent is *Them Days* magazine, an oral history quarterly founded in 1975. It is easily the most-read publication in Labrador, and its subject matter and aesthetic remain amazingly hegemonic. For example, the Great Labrador Novel Contest in 1997 encouraged members of the public to submit the first page of a novel, and of the hundred or so collected, nearly all of them show exactly the same idea of what a novel should be—that is, a memoir of time in the woods. For that matter, fiction is almost non-existent in Labrador, in any medium.

Why did this happen? How do *Woman of Labrador* and *Them Days* have such an influence on Labradorian imagination? Let me ask this another way. If Goudie is the end of our chronology, then Lydia Campbell is the beginning (see Fagan). Her *Sketches of Labrador Life* were published by *The Evening Telegram* in St. John’s in 1894-1895, made a small splash, and then were largely forgotten until their republication by *Them Days* in 1980.

But if Goudie’s book aimed to represent Labrador’s past to Labradorians, and to warn against an impending future, Campbell’s presented Labrador to an audience *outside* of Labrador. In the 1970s, Labrador was ready for Goudie’s message; but in the 1890s, there was no Labrador to listen to Campbell.

So what changed in between? Let us shift from aboriginal female writers to white male social reformers. In Campbell’s day in the 1890s, we also had Wilfred Grenfell, whom most of you will know about. Let me just quote biographer Ron Rompkey: “Grenfell is most fruitfully understood not as a doctor or even as a missionary or as a hero, but as a social reformer whose instruments were political and cultural” (xiv). His effect on Labrador’s society was enormous. Still, the society he sought to reform was a coastal fishing society, and from the beginning, he characterized Labradorians as his countrymen: “these hungry pale faces of people of our own race and blood” (Kerr, 79). He did not imagine Labrador as a distinct or aboriginal society. But his lieutenant, Harry Paddon, did.

Paddon lived in North West River, in the centre of Labrador, and he soon developed a more inclusive and modern sense, of who Labradorians were—as well as a desire to mobilize them politically. A year after arriving, he “realized he no longer spoke for the London board, but for the trappers, fishermen, traders, and aboriginals he treated day by day” (Paddon, xxvi). He lived out

his entire life in Labrador, and as mineral exploration began in the 30s, he worried that “The native races may be exterminated or put on reserves, and a new population may destroy the identity of the community that we have known” (243). Paddon also expounded general, nationalist views of Labrador society. In 1927, he wrote the “Ode to Labrador,” still a recognized anthem, and the first major, symbolic declaration of Labradorian solidarity (see Butler and McGrath).

Another issue is that Labrador’s borders were not settled until that same year, 1927. But a country—or a nation—needs not only boundaries, but also interconnectivity within them. Members of the nation’s public have to be able to communicate with one another. A central figure here is Lester Burry—a United Church missionary at North West River, who became the first official elected by Labradorians to represent Labrador. A friend and classmate of Joey Smallwood’s, Burry was Labrador’s delegate to Newfoundland’s National Convention, and contributed to the decision to join Confederation in 1949.

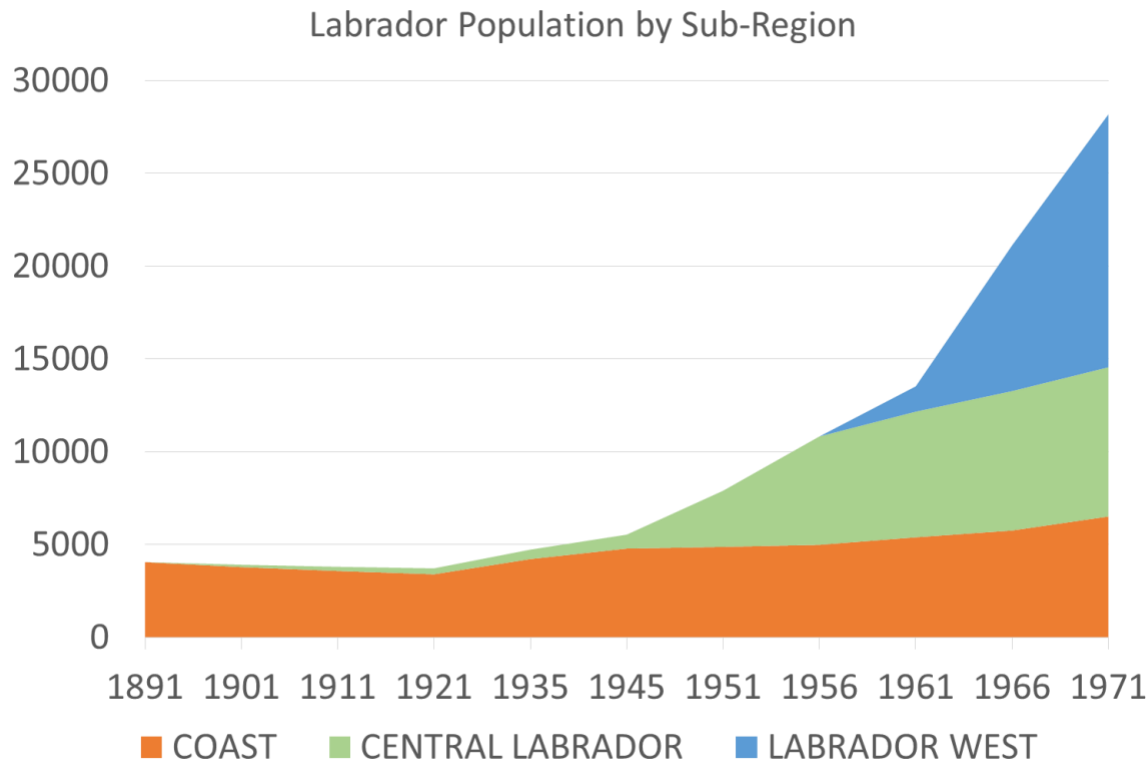
Like Grenfell and Paddon, Burry’s work exceeded his profession, reaching, as biographer Hector Swain puts it, to “the totality of Labrador life” (iv). In this regard, perhaps his greatest contribution was radio—and in this way he was not unlike Smallwood himself, whose *Barrelman* broadcasts were so significant in developing a nationalist discourse in Newfoundland (see Webb).

Burry hand-manufactured radio sets for use by Lake Melville area trappers on their traplines, where they would stay for weeks at a time, with little to no human contact. He distributed these sets and conducted daily radio broadcasts, including sermons and news, for twenty years.

Elizabeth Goudie, despite all her reservations about social change in Labrador, describes the results simply: “We were all happy. We had been cut off from the outside world for so long” (quoted in Swain, 40). For the first time, someone was uniting Labrador into a public, despite their isolation not only from the outside world, but from one another inside their own world.

So, by 1949 the centre of Labradorian identity shifted from the coastal fishing communities to the residents of central, inland Labrador. Labrador had also been clearly demarcated legally and politically, and radio and transportation networks were beginning to enabling the development and dissemination of a Labradorian identity.

But I set the dawn of Labrador nationalism to about 1969-1970. The twenty years in between represent the time for one generation to grow up in the new reality, more or less. And the story of that time is one of massive industrialization, best related in sparing detail, by a chart (see Mills for source data).



At Grenfell’s arrival and Campbell’s writing in the 1890s, Labrador had about 4,000 residents, and more than 90% were coastal. At Confederation in 1949, there were about 8,000 people, and 40% lived in central Labrador. So a whole new public had appeared. Twenty years later Labrador had almost 30,000 people, of whom nearly half lived and worked on iron mines and hydroelectric developments in the west, and less than a quarter lived on the coast. This positioned the central population as relatively “original”—that is, compared to the real newcomers out west and in their own midst, they were able to position themselves as authentic Labradorians: their traditions predated major industrial development, and although they too were a new population, they were much more likely to have local heritage, often including Aboriginal ancestry, which maintained their cultural continuity to earlier years. That allowed them to forward a thesis about Labrador; and the presence of an encroaching other (mostly Newfoundlanders) obliged them to do so. So, full circle, here we have the audience for *Woman of Labrador*. Here we have Labrador nationalism.

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