

Mina Benson Hubbard (1870-1956)



In July, 1905, a young widow embarked upon a 576-mile journey through a relatively unexplored region of central Labrador. This trip was to complete the work left unfinished by her late husband, Leonidas Hubbard, Jr. He had conceived the idea of finding and mapping a navigable water route from North West River on Lake Melville to the George River post. Essentially this route traced the length of the Nascaupée River to its headwaters, crossed the height of land to the George River, and followed its waters down to Ungava Bay. Mr. Hubbard had set out in 1903, but his party was under-equipped and misled by primitive maps. The venture cost him his life.

Mina Benson Hubbard became the first white woman to travel over the territory; she was preceded by only two white men. In 1838 John McLean, a Hudson's Bay Company employee, had passed through much of the region, and in 1875-76 Père Lacasse, a Roman Catholic missionary, travelled over the area. Mina, however, produced the first reliable maps of the Nascaupée and George River watersheds. Her book *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador* and her diaries provide descriptions of her encounters with the Naskaupi and Montagnais Indians, and of the last great herds of Labrador's barrenland caribou. She was one of the last people to view the life of central Labrador in its pristine state.

Controversy now surrounds Mr. Hubbard's initial trip and the two contemporary but mutually unacknowledged journeys of his widow and of his friend Dillon Wallace. Some believe Mrs. Hubbard's journey to have been motivated by a desire for revenge upon Wallace, whom she held responsible for her husband's death; others see her as a glory-seeker, determined to keep the Hubbard name in the spotlight. Whatever the case may be, her story provides a fascinating glimpse into Labrador history.

Mina Benson was born in April, 1870, the sixth of eight children. She grew up on a 100-acre farm near Bewdley, Ontario, where she was taught respect for a strict code of Christian ethics and for the value of hard work. The Benson family highly valued a conscientious and philanthropic way of life, and Mina, who entered the nursing profession, was no exception. In the spring of 1899, this spirited, resolute woman completed her nursing degree. Her first patient was an aspiring young journalist named Leonidas Hubbard, who was suffering from typhoid fever. A lasting friendship developed, out of which grew a worshipful love and dedication. Married on 31 January 1901, they spent their five-month honeymoon in the Great Smoky Mountains. Soon afterwards, Leonidas's position as assistant editor of *Outing* magazine required numerous wilderness trips, and Mina sometimes accompanied him, thereby acquainting herself with backwoods travel.

After less than three years of marriage, she saw her husband off on his fateful expedition. She never saw him again; in January, 1904, a telegram notified her of his death. The news dealt Mina a severe blow, for her already reverent love had become magnified by her husband's absence. In her diary Mina dwells on the personality of her "lost Laddie", whom she saw as a hero willing to sacrifice himself for a valiant cause. She describes him as strong and brave, kind and generous, a man who fervently believed in the power of faith, hope, and charity — three words that resounded throughout his own diary. He was a man "who liked to test his own fitness. It meant risk, but he knew his own capabilities and believed in his own resourcefulness." In light of her husband's death, this statement takes on an unintended ironic quality, but Mina's praise was wholly sincere. She herself tried to emulate those virtues she perceived in Leonidas.

Unlike her husband, who was lured to Labrador by romantic notions of adventure, Mina Hubbard was drawn by a desire to clear her husband's name, which she believed had been seriously blemished by Wallace's account of the original Hubbard expedition. In fact, Mina had requested that Wallace write the narrative, and she was prepared to pay handsomely. With a ghost writer, Wallace completed the manuscript of *The Lure of the Labrador Wild* in January, 1905. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hubbard found consolation in the letters Leonidas had written before his death, which "took from the hearts of those who loved him best the intolerable bitterness, because [they] told that he had not only dreamed his dream — he had attained his Vision." But this peaceful acceptance disappeared after reading Wallace's manuscript. Mina was appalled by the

author's apparent lack of respect for her late husband's reputation. The book renewed her grief, which manifested itself as hostility toward Wallace. She believed that he was trying to reap acclaim by undermining Hubbard's leadership. According to Mina, Wallace depicted Hubbard as all too human, unashamedly revealing the mental and physical weaknesses that she chose to delete from her edition of the diaries. To Mina's thinking, Wallace's offence was great, and she set about to rectify the situation.

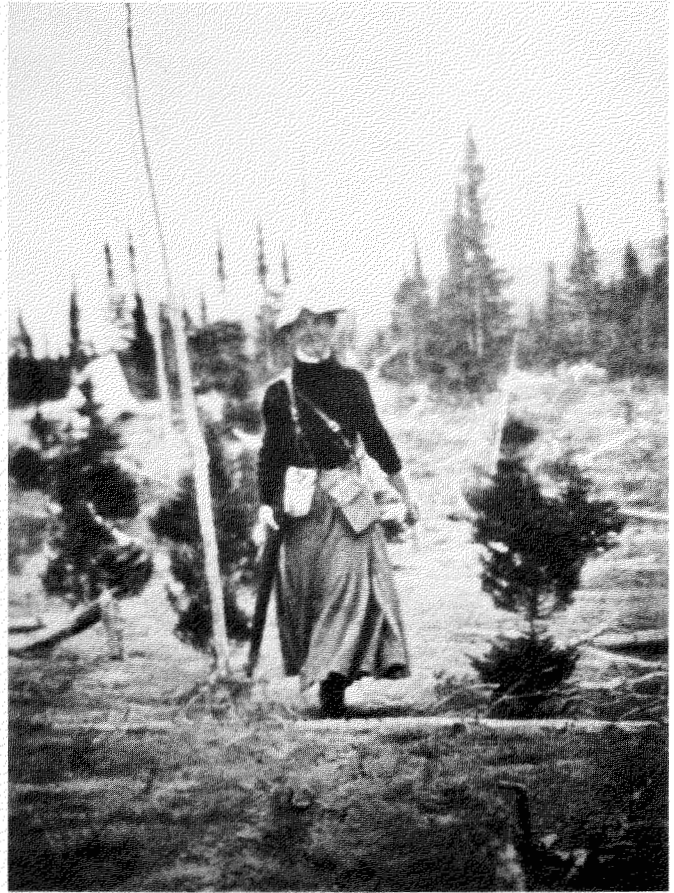
Her choice of Wallace as the scapegoat was no coincidence; it was born out of a deep-seated jealousy. Wallace and Hubbard had grown increasingly close on their disastrous journey, and an undeniable "bond of affection and love" developed between the two men. No doubt, both Wallace and Mrs. Hubbard wanted to share the last available part of the young explorer's life — Wallace to tell the story of their trip as he had promised Leonidas he would, Mina to pass on the message "that should inspire his fellow men to encounter the battle of life without flinching." Both Wallace and Mrs. Hubbard believed their own work to be sanctioned by God, and saw each other's as exploitative.

As her resentment grew, she began to suspect Wallace of more than simply taking advantage of her husband's memory. Her distrust centered on Wallace's failure to reach Hubbard's tent with leftover flour retrieved from a cache. Mina dwelt on this, blowing it out of proportion. (She quoted Leonidas as having once said that "*real friends* [are those] who may be trusted *to a finish*, who are not *quitters*.") She firmly denied Wallace's story that he did not see Hubbard's tent (or could not, since he was afflicted with smoke blindness) and that he suffered greatly from frostbite and exposure. George Elson, guide of both Hubbard expeditions, recounted to Mrs. Hubbard what he had been told by Allen Goudie about Wallace's rescue. In her diary she quoted Elson:

He had...a good fire and a good bed of boughs, and was quite able to walk. They also tracked him to within 200 yards of the tent. There was no trace of his having wandered about looking...He simply turned around and went back...Allen said he and Donald said to each other...that it just looked as if he did not want to get to the tent. He still had some of the flour.

Whatever the reasons for her trip to Labrador, she effectively accomplished what few women would have attempted. Her expedition was efficient, well-organized, and completed on schedule. She was genuinely surprised at how easily she slipped into the routine of wilderness travel. Despite various luxuries (including an air mattress, a feather pillow, and a hot-water bottle) and the fact that she left paddling to the men of her party, the trip was not without hardships. Moreover, she felt the burden of responsibility for the venture.

After the trip, Mina basked in the warmth of public attention. She wrote her story for *Harper's* and set off on a lecture tour in England. In 1908 she met and married Harold Ellis, a British Member of Parliament. Together they had three children but were divorced in the 1920s. In 1936, at the age of 66, she returned to Canada and the wilderness once more, accompanying her old friend George Elson on a canoe trip down



the Moose River in northern Ontario. At the age of 86, Mina Hubbard died when, in a state of confusion, she walked into the path of a speeding train.

FURTHER READINGS

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