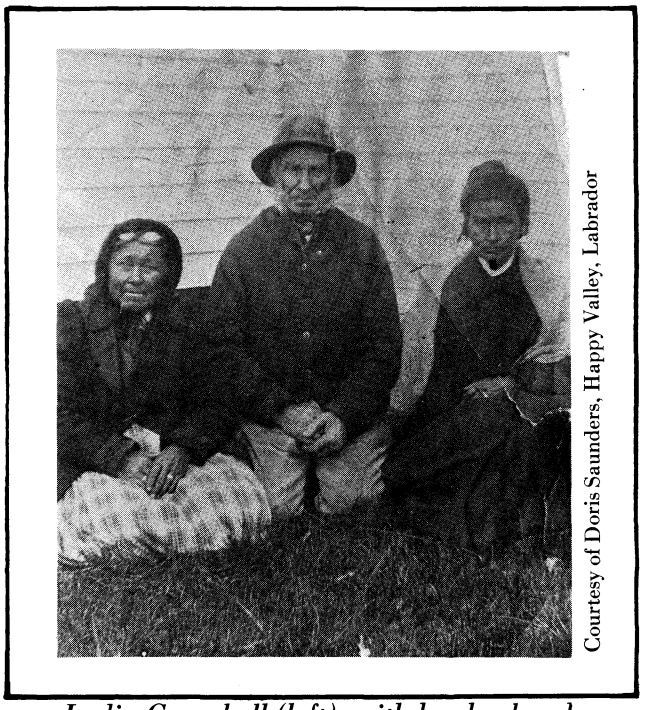
Sketches of a Labrador Life

Lydia Campbell

Lydia Campbell, fille d'une Inuit et d'un Anglais décrit la vie dure subie par un grand nombre de femmes du Labrador.



Courtesy of Doris Saunders, Happy Valley, Labrador

Lydia Campbell (left), with her husband and daughter

Introduction

Labrador is an immense peninsula that forms the most eastern section of the Canadian Arctic. Its native inhabitants are the Inuit who live along the coast and the Naskapi and Montagnais ('Mountaineer') Indians whose traditional hunting grounds lie in the interior.

White people (usually men) began arriving in the 18th century. They were missionaries, agents of the Hudson's Bay Co.'s fur empire to the west and fisherman from Newfoundland to the south, with a trickle of settlers coming from England and Scotland. Many of these men married Inuit women whose daughters, in turn, married white men.

This is the story of Lydia Campbell, the daughter of an Inuit mother and an English father. She wrote it over a period of nine months in 1893-1894 at the suggestion of a Newfoundland Clergyman, Arthur C. Waghorne, who prefaced Lydia's diary/autobiography with these remarks:

'The last few years I have been in the habit of exchanging clothing for the interesting skin and bead work so ingeniously made by the Labrador women. A little stock of such articles I hope soon to offer for sale in St. John's, on behalf of the Labrador people. About two years ago in forwarding my parcel of clothing and literature, I sent also to an old Labrador woman of Grosswater Bay, of whom I had some knowledge, an exercise book, and begged her to be kind enough to write some account of Labrador life and ways ... Readers will please to remember that it is the production of an old woman of 75 years of age, born and bred on the Labrador, of one who has never been to school, and has led and still lives, a very hard laborious life ...'

Waghorne submitted Lydia's work to the St. John's Evening Herald *where it appeared in 11 installments from Dec. 3, 1894 to Feb. 6, 1895. What follows is an extract of about one-third of Lydia Campbell's diary. In it she describes the life of a woman on the Labrador coast more than 80 years ago. It is a seasonal life of migration to the headlands for the summer fishery and a return, in September, to the sheltered, wooded bays for the winter hunting. It is the record of a woman who, like thousands of others, was quietly helping to build a nation.*

Anne Hart

You must please excuse my writing and spelling, for I have never been to school, neither had I a spelling book in my young days — me, a native of this country, Labrador, Hamilton's Inlet, Esquimaux Bay. If you wish to know who I am, I am old Lydia Campbell, formerly Lydia Brooks, then Blake, after Blake, now Campbell. So you see, ups and downs has been my life all through, and now I am what I am.

snares, for I has about twenty-four snares, made myself to set them up, and I gets pretty tired some days. Often the snow is deep and soft, just now about three feet deep in the woods, but it can't be expected otherwise with me to get tired, for I am last birthday seventy five years old, last month, first November.

I have seen many ups and downs, but the Good Lord has safely brought me through. I have been bereaved of my first husband and

Courtesy of Doris Saunders, Happy Valley, Labrador

Daniel and Lydia Campbell

Christmas Day. As this is a holy day for us, the Campbells and Blakes, my family, I think that it is a nice time to write a few lines, a beginning of this winter.

Maligan River, December 25, 1893

I have been very busy all this fall in particular, for I has a lot to do with three little motherless granddaughters to work for, beside their poor father and a big son, going off hunting and wood chopping, and the weather so cold as to need all the warm clothing possible to warm them.

The weather thiry below zero often, and myself off to my rabit snares, about four miles going and coming, over ice and snow, with snow shoes and axe and game bag. Some days I has three rabbits in one day, caught in

four of his children. One is left me, Thomas Blake. It is his little children that I has to look to now. The present husband that I has now is nearly as old as me. We has three children left

Maligan River, January 13 or 14, Monday

by him out of eight — two boys and a girl. They all has a family to look to. We have a meeting some times, and when our large rivers freeze over hard enough to go on, then comes the time for trouting, as we call it, then most of our grandaughters and grandsons gather together here to trout.

One family, John Campbell's children, comes along shore; about four miles he lives. My eldest son, Thomas Blake, my first husband's son, and his motherless children is near us, next door — none near us but them

Courtesy of Doris Saunders, Happy Valley, Labrador

Mensie and Hannah Meshlin

and out dear children's graves. We can see their headstones at a distance, over on the cranberry banks, so pretty it looks in the fall when we come home to our summer quarters above seventy miles from here.

When we are sailing up in our large boat, to see the ducks in our bay when we are nearing the river, and when we get ashore to the pretty river banks and walking up the path under our large trees, we often meet with a flock of partridges flying up to the trees. Before we get to the house, so pretty, then is the scramble among the young ones to see the first turnips and potatoes and, sure enough, all around the house is green with turnip tops and between them and the wall of the house is hanging red with moss-berries.

Then we are home to our winter house for ten months or more. We are home among ducks, partridges, trout, rabbits, berries, traps for snaring foxes, martins, wolverines, mountain cats, musk-rats, minks — and most of all them kinds of things have I caught in my lifetime.

Sometimes we have a visit from black bears and wolves, which the former we often gets, but seldom the wolf. Some winters we have had the luck to get a deer or two. Some times, formerly, we have had as many as ten or more in one winter. I have myself been deer hunting and shot two but my sister, Hannah Meshlin, have killed three in one spring.

That was our happy days, with all our little children round us. That was about thiry years ago now. Ah, well, all works together for good, we are told. Now when I look back it seems not very long yet. When I look for my Susan, my eldest daughter, she has been married, left our home, went away with her husband, a clerk of the Hudson Bay Company and had three children. She died up to Seven Islands.

We are all scattered today. My husband, Dan Campbell, is not home yet from Labacatto. He went up there to see our brother-in-law, Mensie Meshlin. He is not

able to work now but his wife Hannah, my old sister, she is over eighty years old and yet she can take her gun and axe and game bag and shoots a white partridge or two, now and then. I have known her fighting with a wolverine, a strong animal of the size of a good sized dog. She had neither gun nor axe but a little trout stick, yet she killed it after a long battle.

I wish there were more Hannahs in the world for braveness. She brought up her first family of little children when their father died, teached them all to read and write in the long winter nights and hunt with them in the day. She would take the little ones on the sled, haul them on over snow and ice to a large river, chop ice about three feet thick, catch about two or three hundred trout and haul them and the children home, perhaps in the night. The men of the Hudson Bay Company used to get her to make a lot of things — pants, shirts, flannel slips, draws, sealskin boots, deer skin shoes for the winter, socks, leggings, mitts made of duffel and deer skins, coats, caps, as well as washing, starching, ironing and what not. She had all the care of the children while a widow.

My Day's Work

Dear friend, I have been a widow like her, and brought up children while a widow, but I had a brother-in-law and a mother-in-law and three sisters-in-law but I still worked pretty hard to bring them up. Ah, well, I am alive and well and able to work yet, with some few little motherless grandaughters and grandsons. And when I feel lonely I goes hunting, yes, and bring home some game. On my way I goes and sees the graves under the ground and deep snow. I oft sing an hymn or prayer, comes home light-hearted and think it won't be long, my journey here, thank God — then to a better country, a better home for us to journey to, although I am only old Aunt Lydia Campbell now.

My dear friend, you want to know more things about the country ways and fashions. This has been my home ever since I was born, and I have seen plenty of ups and downs. When I remember first, to understand, I thought that there was no place as good as this in the world and that my father and mother and my two sisters was the best in the world — but our good father used to take me on his knee and tell me his home was a better country where he came from. Only it was hard to live there after his good old father died, and his mother could not keep him, so he stayed with a good old minister that was living in the parish until he died. Then he had to come out to this country and try his fortune in this place for the wars were raging between England France and all over the world. The press-gang was pressing the young men so he and a lot more English people came up the shore for wood cutting and sealing, fishing and the cod. Then, of course, they had to take wives of the natives of this country.

I think we lived happy together until our dear sister, Elizabeth, got married to a young half-breed. That was my first grief, to leave her behind. Well, that is about sixty-eight years or above, that broke up our family circle.

Our dear father had no school book to teach us in, nothing but a family bible and a Common Prayer to teach us in. So if you see a lot of mistakes in this writing and spelling please excuse my scrawl, for I have never been in school.

I am writing these few lines before daylight. It is my use, rising, to make a fire, say my prayers, wash lamps, get on breakfast and sweep the house. Then I say it is time to call up my husband and our big boy, Hugh Palisen, and my girl, Esther Blake, and my daughter Ella, our little pet. After breakfast I puts on my out-door clothes, takes my game bag and axe and matches, in case it is needed, and off I goes over across the bay, over ice and snow for about two miles or more, gets three rabbits some days out of twenty or more snares. And you say well done, old woman, but such is life in Esquimaux Bay. But I am not able to see to thread my needle in the night with the little ones to do it.

Maligan River, January 22, 1894

We are not in want, so far, but we don't know how long. We are told whoever trust in the Lord shall want no manner of good. We grows our own potatoes up here, and turnips, and we gather berries enough of two of three kinds for the winter, and we get ducks in the fall, scattered seal, and when the ice comes in on the rivers — for we has two — then is what

we call trouting. Our grandchildren come from their homes to gather here. Then the ice is alive with trout — fine large ones and little ones. What fun following the trout as the tide rises or falling, all chopping ice as hard as they can. I have been late and early at it with my children. Alas, where are they now?

I was out the other day walking in the woods with my snow shoes all alone, looking up at the pretty trees, at the high spruce and birches looking so high and stately. I saw in the sunshine such a pretty sight high above the highest trees, a flock of the beautiful white partridge. How pretty it looked, and the snow glistening and ice and trees and me — poor old mortal — drinking in all the beautiful scenery; I, which will soon be out of sight of it all, going the way all the people has gone before.

Maligan River, April 7, 1894

At one time the Esquimaux was very plentiful all along the shore and the islands, but now there is only about six or seven families. How pretty and tall the first race of the Esquimaux was, and so lively, when I first remember to have seen them. But they have dwindled down so small with the cursed drink and tobacco smoking, and keeping and pressing them down under debts to the agents — now they are few and small, half starved, and possibly naked.

I knew one large family by the name of Palisers, a Esquimaux people, a nice lot. They were thought a good deal of by the white people; they seemed happy together. The old woman was so proud of her big grown up sons, four in number, her boys, and a daughter and her husband. Ill luck befell them. The youngest, a young man, fell through the ice and got drowned. One shot himself, so I heard, accidently. Another bought some rum. He and his wife got drunk. the wife lay down in the boat and her husband got knocked over board while steering with an oar and was never found.

When his poor old mother heard what had befallen her third son she was nearly out of her mind. When her last child died she did not live long after, to the sorrow of most of the white people, for she was midwife for their wives. Well, one day when the men and women and children were all out of the tent, she hung herself. What lamentations there was that day.

I was about twenty then, I think. I never kept an account of the times or how they went, but I was teaching the children of the large family that I got married into. I could not write then, but I could read and teach them to read, sing hymns and pray as my dear old father taught us. There was no ministers nor school teacher them times here in this country.

Since I wrote last on this book I have been what people call cruising about here. I have been visiting some of my friends, all though scattered far apart, with my snow shoes and my axe on my shoulders. The nearest house to this place is about five miles up a beautiful river and then through woods, what the French calls a portage. It is what I call pretty.

Many is the time that I have been going with dogs and komatick forty or fifty years ago, with my husband and family to North West River to keep New Years or Easter. But my children grew up, ten in number. Some got married, some died, young men and women; some are in our bay yet. One, a daughter, Margaret Dreak, I have visited last month on my way up to Sabachro, a mountain near, to see my dear old sister, Hannah Meshlin. She is smart yet. She hunts fresh meat and chops holes in the three foot ice this very winter and catches trout with her hook, enough for her household.

I have been hunting most every day since Easter and going to my rabbit snares and still traps, cat traps and mink traps.

July 26, 1894

There had been many strange things happening to us in this world. I remember as having no better thought that when a little child died his or her soul would be lost — as many are thinking yet — unless they are christened. So one day as I was getting ready myself and my children — two little ones, one three weeks old and the other five years old — to see to my rabbit snares, I put my little baby, after putting on my hood, on the bed. She rolled on to the floor and stunned herself for a little while. I got a fright because she was not christened. So I took the book and

baptized her with my out-door clothing on and my Sarah, five years old, standing by. The father and grandfather and Aunt Sarah and Uncle George was off hunting. I was alone. When she could suck I thought she was all right, and I took her out on my back, and lead the other by the hand with my axe through the snow to my rabbit snares and got a few rabbits. Such was the life among the half-breeds in Esquimaux Bay.

During the same time that I have been writing about, three days before my little Susan was born, we was looking for a place to set our traps. My husband, William Blake, went up along shore, three or four miles distant from our new habitation, and saw three fine deer and shot them all. His mother and sister and brother went off with him and left me and my little girl Sarah and brought home the deer. They had a boat load. This was Saturday, I think, and little Susan was born Sunday evening. I was nearly catcht alone in child bearing, far away from any other habitation. Well, that was the little girl I christened about three weeks after she was born, that I thought I killed when she rolled off the bed when I was going to take her out to my rabbit snares. Well, you see what ups and downs has been my life.

Cul de Sac, August 1, 1894

My dear friends, you will please excuse my writing and spelling, for I has to look from the paper what I am doing — it swims by me, my eyesight is dim now, and I has a lot to do besides. I am seventy-five now and my sister Hannah is older than me and our eldest sister was five years older than her. Ah, my dear mother, ah, my poor father, where are they now? My poor parents, I hope to meet them in a better world.

My good mother has been dead and buried so long ago that people that lives there in the winter says that the large juniper and white spruce is now very large growing on her and two old English men by her side. I remember that time so well when father met us at the door, as we came home from seeing our rabbit snares, and told us she was dying. We all went in and kneeled down near our good mother breathing her last. By the time father was done reading and praying she was gone. Oh, what did I do? Where to go, far from any other habitation?

When I was about eleven years old, after my poor mother died, my father took me to live with an old Englishman by the name of John Whittle and his wife who was blind and lame. In the winter I was left alone with the lame woman, Sarah by name, and the weather was so cold that father and John Whittle could not get home for the cold and drifting for about a week. I was so afraid I would be stiffelet in the drift getting water from a distant brook. Behold me, about eleven years old, with my little dickie on made out of kersey and my serge frock under. The little woman said to me, are you afraid to go? A little, I said. Well, then, she said, I will sit here and sing as loud as I can and that will keep you a little company. But when I got out as far as the porch I lost the sound of her voice. Poor little woman, with her native dress and a dicky and breeches on, and little seal skin boots on her feet on a little stool, plaiting deer sinew for to sew on boot taps.

The times has changed now from the time I have been writing about. The first time that my dear old father came from England there was not many white people here. It was lonely, he said, often about here, no one to see for miles but Esquimaux and Mountaineers and they was plentyful. He said that dozens of canoes of Mountaineers would come down out of the big bay. They used to come skimming along like a flock of ducks, going out egg hunting on the island. Well, I know it is a pretty sight to see a lot of birch canoes shining red in the sunshine. I have seen them paddling along I have, the men steering, the women paddling, the children singing or chatting. Where are they now? We hardly ever see a family now except in winter.

August 3, 1894

My dear friends, my time is short to write much longer. We are now going to get our winter fish while we can. Men, women and children does all they can to get something for the winter. Our winter house and gardens is about seventy or eighty miles from here. We are never in want yet, although my old man and me are getting past seventy and no one to work for us but a poor cripple boy and a young girl, an oprhan, and our daughter-in-law and her little girl, our little Ella, our little pet.