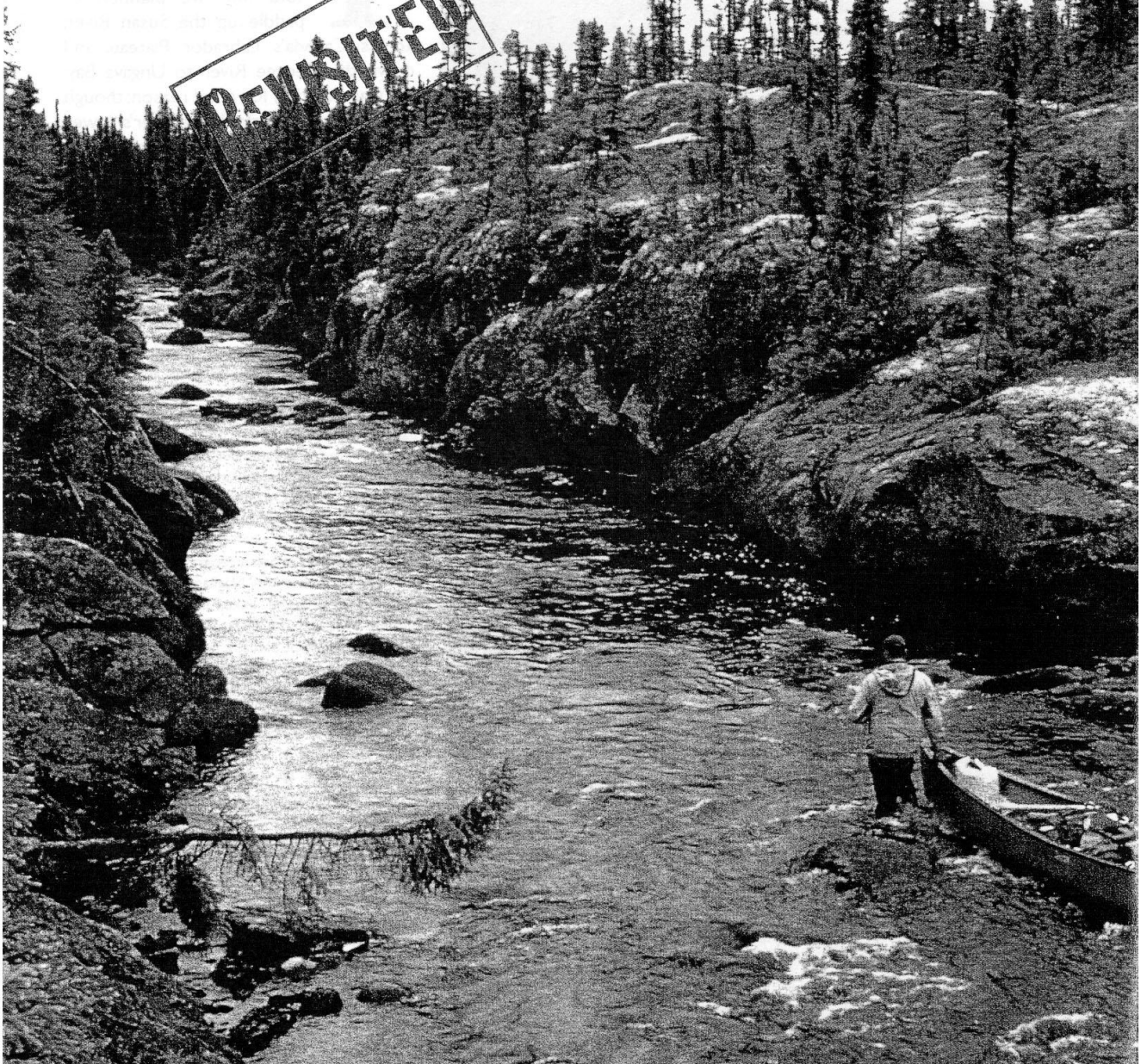


# Hubbard

REVISITED



**T**HREE CANOEISTS TEST A 100-YEAR-OLD QUESTION:



## CAN IT BE DONE?

by Jim Niedbalski

**T**he man from Northwest River Post laughed and shook his head when we told him we planned to paddle up the Susan River, across Canada's Labrador Plateau, and down the George River to Ungava Bay. He was skeptical for good reason: though trappers have worked the river's lower stretches for well over a century, no canoe party had attempted the Susan since 1903, when a three-man team led by American Leonidas Hubbard struggled up the river—and eventually back down—in a famous and tragic expedition that ended with George Elson and Dillon Wallace leaving their friend for dead.

Now on the centennial of Hubbard's expedition, our three-man team was attempting to finish the trip that killed him. Hubbard's journey had been doomed from the start, when his party paddled past the mouth of the Naskapi River, which offered a difficult but navigable route into the interior, and instead started up the nearly impassable Susan. On June 24, 2003, Troy Gipps, Brad Bassi and I set out to retrace Hubbard's mistaken route.

Renowned Canadian geographer A.P. Low had told Hubbard that the Naskapi flowed into the west side of Grand Lake, so the adventurers blithely bypassed the bay to the northeast into which the Naskapi actually flows. Time may have been a factor in this fatal decision: Hubbard's party didn't leave Northwest River until July 15th—late for their undertaking.

Paddling in one 18-foot boat, the three men found the mouth of the Susan at the lake's west end and turned up-current, convinced that the placid stream was the Naskapi. Almost immediately, the stream changed to shallow and boulder-strewn—nothing like they'd been led to expect.

"He must have been exaggerating," Hubbard said of a trapper's claim to have sailed his canoe 30 miles up the Naskapi, according to Wallace's 1905 best-seller *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*. And so the men began a harrowing three-month ordeal that ended where it began, on the Susan, with Hubbard dying of exhaustion and starvation in a place that Wallace remembered biblically as "The Valley of the Shadow of Death."

Photo by Troy Gipps

"I will not," Troy announced as he yanked the boat over a jumble of boulders, "ever recommend that anyone come up the Susan." Brad and I couldn't disagree. Our progress was almost indiscernible—one or two miles a day for ten days. Our paddles stayed in the canoes most of the way. Where the river was relatively flat and more than ankle-deep, we walked and pulled the boats. More often we dragged them over the bony riverbed, leaving a trail of green and red gel-coat.

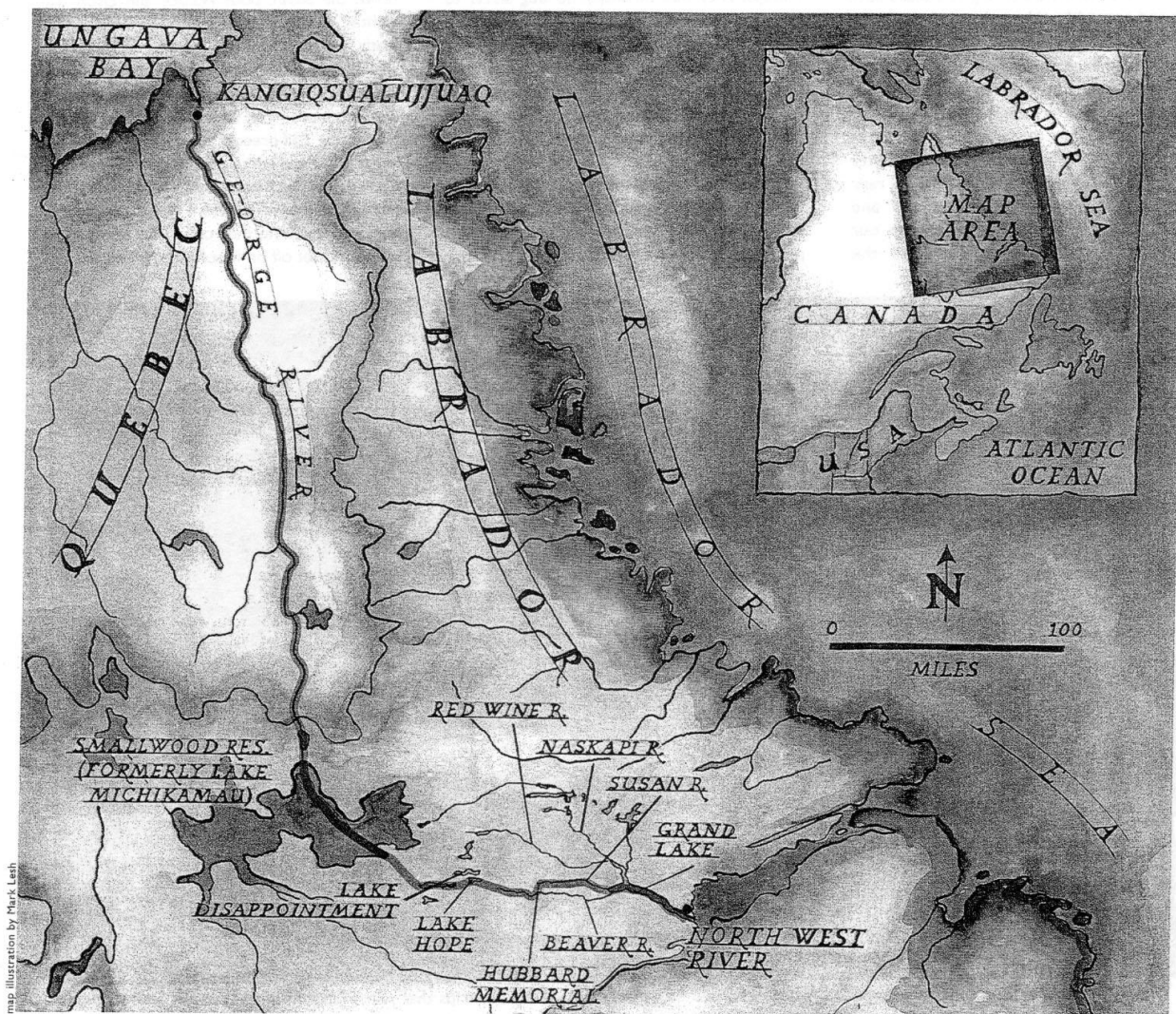
Wallace described a century before, we found the bronze memorial plaque marking the spot where Hubbard was found dead on Oct. 29, 1903. (Wallace's son Dillon Wallace III and Rudy Mauro installed the plaque in 1977.) The men had reached this spot on Oct. 17 during their retreat from the interior. They were traveling on foot because Hubbard, against the advice of Elson and Wallace, had decided to leave the canoe at the Beaver River.

Too exhausted to continue, Hubbard stayed at the camp, the tent pitched in front of a large rock that now bears the plaque. The

cabin. They found the rotten flour, but Wallace—starving, disoriented in the snow, and delirious—never found Hubbard.

After a monumental effort in which he nearly drowned while pushing a homemade raft across the mouth of the Beaver River, Elson reached the Blake family's cabin on Grand Lake Oct. 27. A rescue party plucked Wallace from death on the 29th; they found Hubbard's body that same afternoon.

We spent the night yards away from Hubbard's last camp. All of us left notes in an ammunition can beside the rock, and I left a



map illustration by Mark Lesh

We reached the junction of the Susan and Goose Creek (named by Elson for the birds he shot there) in a few days less than the explorers in 1903. On this gray afternoon, pelted with the same sheets of rain that

next day, Wallace and Elson hiked downstream to retrieve a near-empty bag of flour they had cached weeks earlier. Wallace planned to take the flour back to Hubbard to try and keep him alive; Elson would continue to Grand Lake in hopes of finding a trapper's

paperback reprint of Wallace's book. The can was stuffed with notes from people who have visited the site over the last few decades, mostly by helicopter. One exception is the group of four canoeists who hiked over while running the nearby Red Wine River in 1980.

## IN 1903, IT WAS NOT A HALF-BREED'S PLACE TO QUESTION THE JUDGMENT OF THE WHITE MAN WHO HAD HIRED HIM, EVEN IF THAT DECISION WOULD LIKELY PROVE FATAL.

In 1988, two men from that party, James West Davidson and John Rugge, published *Great Heart*, an historical novel about the 1903 trip and the competing 1905 expeditions led by Wallace and Mina Hubbard, Leonidas's widow (see sidebar).

Rather than continue up the Susan, Hubbard's party chose to follow Goose Creek. We did as well, traveling at a snail's pace over and around boulders, downed trees, and gravel bars. Goose Creek was a trickle of water hidden beneath layers of peat and grass. We followed it until it ended in a string bog deep in the Labrador interior.

**W**e reached the bog after six straight days of rain, wind and chill and promptly got lost. In our haste to complete the

portage to the headwaters of the Beaver River, we followed a trickle south when we should have stayed west. A quick hike up a barren knoll revealed the proper route, and we retreated to the swamp, chastened and reminded of our predecessors' stumblings.

The 1903 party—mostly Elson—spent a lot of time scouting potential routes from hilltops. They had no maps, no bug shirts to keep the relentless black flies and mosquitoes at bay, and no 21st century rain gear. Their canoe was wood and canvas—far heavier and less durable than our Royalex boats. No matter how much this trip hurt, we would never experience the pain, anguish and sorrow they endured.

We had paddled and dragged our canoes 42 miles from the mouth of the Susan, gaining more than 1,000 feet of elevation. Now we portaged a mile downhill, losing precious

altitude that we would sweat to regain on the Beaver. At least now the river was deep and wide, without the muscle-wrenching canoe drags that epitomized our ascent of the Susan and Goose Creek.

Sitting on the Beaver's tamarack-lined bank, we questioned Hubbard's decision to abandon the canoe here on their retreat back down the Susan. Both Wallace and Elson had wanted to stay on the Beaver, but Wallace was loath to challenge his friend's decision too strenuously. Elson, who was by far the most experienced outdoorsman on the expedition, was also metis—half white, half Cree. In 1903, it was not a half-breed's place to question the judgment of the white man who had hired him, even if that decision would likely prove fatal. Hubbard preferred to return on familiar ground, however fearsome the route. They cached the canoe and set off on foot for the Susan.

photo by Jim Nietbaakki



**HUBBARD HERNIA** WHILE RETRACING THE ROUTE, PORTAGING WAS AS BIG A PART OF THE TRIP AS PADDLING.

### Unfinished Business

**In 1905**, Dillon Wallace returned to Northwest River with a party of five other men to "complete Hubbard's work," as he wrote. On the steamship voyage to Labrador in late June, he met two people he knew all too well—George Elson and Mina Hubbard.

Unbeknownst to Wallace, Leonidas Hubbard's widow Mina had planned her own expedition, determined to restore her husband's good name, which she felt Wallace had impugned with his comments to the media and in his best-selling book about the 1903 expedition, *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*—especially since she had paid a ghost writer \$1,000 to help Wallace craft the book.

Wallace had asked Elson to join his expedition, but Elson said he wouldn't be guiding any trips that year. In fact, he already had promised Mina he would guide for her. Elson was embarrassed over his deceit, and Wallace was furious, but for the most part he kept his indignation to himself.

Both parties ascended the Naskapi watershed, with Mina sticking to the river and Wallace choosing an old Innu portage route. Mina's route proved faster—she beat Wallace to George River Post by more than six weeks. Both Mina and Wallace wrote popular books of their journeys, though neither matched the sales of *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*. Both *The Lure* and Mina's book, *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador*, have been republished in modern paperbacks.

Wallace, a lawyer by trade, never again felt comfortable in the office, and spent the rest of his life traveling to remote wilderness, writing books and magazine articles and teaching wilderness skills. Mina remarried in 1907 and lived most of the rest of her life in Europe.

If they had stayed on the Beaver a week's travel and a five-mile portage around Murdock Rapids would have brought them to safety. Instead, they returned to the place Wallace would later call the Valley of the Shadow of Death. He so loathed the Susan that in 1913, when he returned to Labrador for the last time to place a plaque at Hubbard's death site, he chose to paddle up the Beaver and hike to the Susan, rather than struggle up that Godforsaken stream. He made it to Hubbard's last camp, but without the plaque, which he lost when his canoe overturned on the Beaver. He carved an inscription in the rock and filled in the letters with melted lead. Today, a bit of his faded inscription peeks out from behind the plaque left by his son and Mauro.

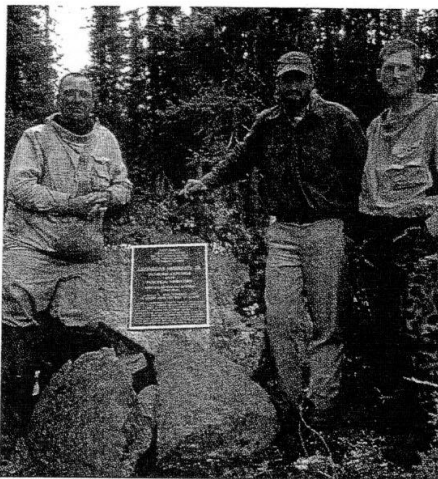
**W**e battled strong current and headwinds on the Beaver, then made the grueling portage to Lake Hope, which Hubbard named for his confidence that it was part of a big river that flowed from Lake Michikamau. It wasn't.

The two-mile carry required two trips and nine hours in windless, 90-degree heat. We reached Lake Hope at sunset, its surface a perfect mirror, and paddled farther in half an hour than we had traveled all day.

When the Hubbard party discovered that no big river flowed into Lake Hope, they portaged north to another lake. That lake also wasn't part of a major river, and in a testament to their waning spirits, they named it Lake Disappointment. From there they portaged another 20 miles to Windbound Lake, where they waited out a days-long storm and made the fateful decision to retreat, just five miles from Lake Michikamau and a downstream sleigh ride to Ungava Bay.

This is where we parted company with Hubbard's route. The overland route across the three lakes would likely have taken 10 days, and our schedule didn't allow for the additional time. Instead we continued westward, following the route that Hubbard would have followed if he'd had the luxury of a map. We paddled the upper Metchin River and other small waterways downstream to Michikamau where we re-supplied and rendezvoused with my girlfriend, Caroline Scully, who would paddle with us to the sea.

Hubbard had planned to meet the Innu and Naskapi Indians here and hunt caribou with them; we dined well on food cached in aluminum barrels. All we had to do now was paddle about 400 miles to Ungava Bay. This would be the easy part. We would be traveling downstream.



THE PLAQUE MARKING THE SPOT WHERE HUBBARD WAS FOUND DEAD IN 1903.

**O**ur biggest paddling challenge was crossing the Smallwood Reservoir, where westerly winds could get an 80-mile head start across the huge lake. Despite the lurking possibility of a weather disaster, we were treated to near-glass conditions for much of the crossing. Now in the George headwaters in Quebec, we paddled through a small herd of caribou near Lac Resolution, and saw black bears and bald eagles. The miles ticked by, a welcome change from our tortuous upstream pace. On Indian House Lake, the north wind threatened to wreak havoc with our paddling schedule, at this point between 20 and 30 miles a day. We beat the wind by paddling from dusk until dawn one night.

Below the lake, the river begins a steady descent. We raced down mile after mile of Class II water with an occasional sneak route on Class III-IV, sometimes drifting at six miles per hour. This was the "Whole World on a

Tilt" that Elson wrote about in his journal, where the river ramps on its dash to Ungava Bay. As the river carved its way down through the ancient bedrock, the rocky knolls of its headwaters slowly became towering cliffs and ridges.

Ten miles upriver from Kangiqsulluajuaq, the former George River Post, a storm pinned us down in a small cove for a day. Here we observed the amazing Ungava Bay tide, which turned our lovely cove into a slippery mudflat. Catching the outgoing tide the next day, Caroline and I nearly got carried past the village and into the teeth of the bay, forced to ferry across the current and wash up on the mud flats two miles from the village. Brad and Troy had crossed the current much earlier, but still couldn't make it to the town before the bay turned to mud. Fortunately, the Inuit had built a road out to the point beyond the bay a few years ago. Troy got a ride into town from an Inuit, and a Quebecker later drove out and picked us up.

As I carried the canoe across the mud to the waiting pickup truck, I thought about Elson, Wallace, and especially Hubbard, who longed to see this bay and who staked his reputation on this Labrador adventure. They had ventured into unknown country with primitive equipment and only a compass to find their way. Most people in this rugged land believe Hubbard died because he made mistakes that a seasoned wilderness traveler would have avoided, but they still admire the New Yorker's spirit. Hubbard, Wallace and Elson are forever enshrined in the lore of Canadian paddling.

When we were at Northwest River Post preparing to launch our expedition, the day after a local man had mocked our plans to retrace Hubbard's route, another man drove up and sauntered over. It was Max McLean, with whom I had spoken by telephone the previous winter. Max had run trap lines in this country since his boyhood in the 1930s, and his uncle Duncan had been a member of the 1903 rescue party and Wallace's expedition in 1905.

"I hope you guys do it," he said. "Lots of people have said they were going to do it, but they never followed through. I'd like to see somebody show that Hubbard could have made it, that it can be done." •

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

### OTHER NOTABLE WORKS ABOUT EXPLORING THE LABRADOR WILDERNESS

*Heart So Hungry: The Extraordinary Expedition of Mina Hubbard in the Labrador Wilderness*, by Randall Silvas. (Knopf Canada, 2004).

*The Lure of Labrador Wild*, by Dillon Wallace and Lawrence Millman. (Lyons Press, 2004).

*Great Heart: The History of Labrador Adventure*, by James West Davidson and John Ruge. (Kodansha Globe, 1997).

*Labrador*, by Robert Stewart. (Time Life, 1978).

*Labrador Odyssey*, edited by Ronald Romphey. (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).