

The New Labrador Papers of Captain George Cartwright

Edited by Marianne P. Stopp. 2008. McGill–Queen’s University Press, 1010 Sherbrooke West, Suite 1720, Montreal, QC, Canada, H3A 2R7. 256 pages, 29.95 CAD, Paper.

Captain George Cartwright was a trader on the Labrador coast from 1770 to 1779 and 1783 to 1786, who, in 1792, published a three volume journal of his Labrador experiences. Despite, or perhaps because of “the simplicity of plain language and downright truth”, his account was admired both by Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge for its “odd” and “strange simplicity”. Stopp’s book is an admirable rescue of further, previously unpublished, Labrador documents of Cartwright’s. Her five background chapters place George Cartwright in perspective and cover his Labrador writings, human settlement of Labrador, an account of his life, a description of the new George Cartwright papers, and the historical relevance of those papers. The bulk of the book, pages 88–191, provides a pot-pourri of additions to Cartwright’s 1792 journal. Many of the items are evidence of Cartwright’s interest in natural history and in the skills necessary to survive in the challenging Labrador environment. The book includes seventeen letters, eight of them written by George in Labrador in 1771.

Are there disappointments? Yes, two. Though Stopp’s introduction and annotations are excellent, parts of the Cartwright material may not be of interest to the general reader. The additions to Cartwright’s earlier publications are informative and confirm his interest in natural history but, through no fault of Stopp’s, are presented in Cartwright’s own haphazard sequence, not always a pleasure to read. “Simplicity of plain language and downright truth” does not necessarily make for easy or interesting reading.

Since the word “curlew” appears only once in the additions to Cartwright, Stopp might be excused for what was my second disappointment: not mentioning Cartwright’s main claim to fame, the high esteem in which he is regarded by modern ornithologists. I believe

most of Stopp’s readers would have appreciated the addition of a few facts from Montevicchi and Tuck’s definitive *Newfoundland Birds* (1987), which rated George Cartwright as “a curious naturalist, a natural historian par excellence”, and as the first person to warn of the impending extinction of the Great Auk, then breeding in numbers on Funk Island. Cartwright also documented that the seasonal molts of ptarmigan resulted from feather molts.

Gollop, Barry, and Iversen’s book, *The Eskimo Curlew, a Vanishing Species?* (Saskatchewan Natural History Society special publication #17, 1986), confirms that George Cartwright’s 500 specimens, collected mainly for food, provide “the best calendar of comings and goings ever compiled. ... Eskimo Curlews were one of the delicacies they sought although they did not always have far to go ...”. Gollop *et al.*’s nine pages listed the 102 sightings recorded by George Cartwright during the migration of the then common Eskimo Curlew. The birds arrived as early as 28 July (1777) and departed as late as 24 October (1772). The Eskimo Curlew is thus the second bird species from Labrador, known mainly from Cartwright sightings, that is now believed to be extinct, a sad ending of great biological significance that should have been worthy of at least brief mention.

My quibbles are those of an avid ornithologist. Stopp’s book is an important historiographic document; it has provided a context for Cartwright’s material. Her book will be of interest to anyone with a strong interest in the history of Labrador, and is a worthy addition to college and university libraries, especially those which focus on Newfoundland Labrador.

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