

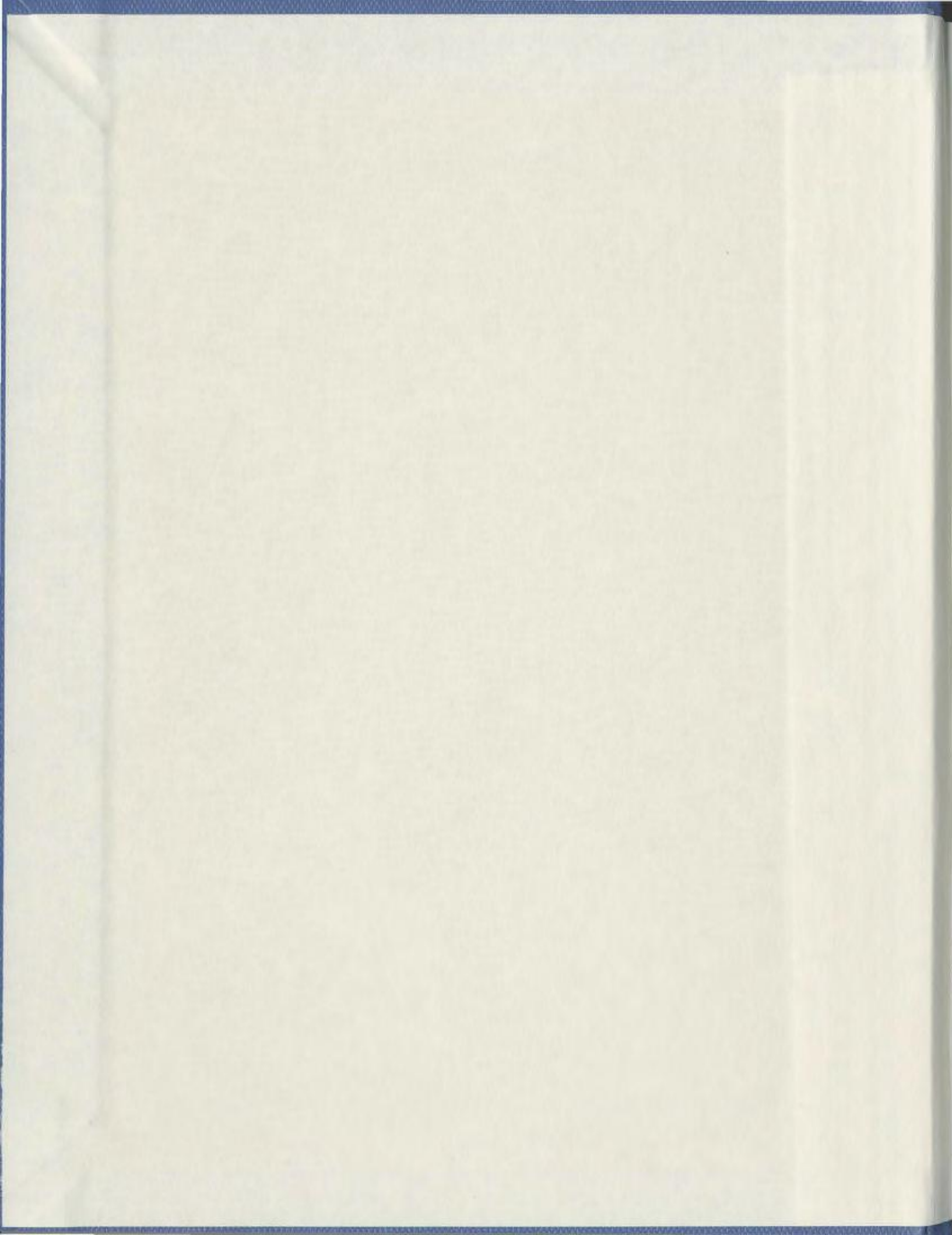
ELLIOTT MERRICK'S LABRADOR:
RE-INVENTING THE META-NARRATIVES OF THE NORTH

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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DALE BLAKE





**ELLIOTT' MERRICK'S LABRADOR:
RE-INVENTING THE META-NARRATIVES OF THE NORTH**

BY

© DALE BLAKE, B.A., B.Ed., B.S.Ed.

**A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate
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requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts**

**Department of English
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PREFACE

I personally became aware of Elliott Merrick's passionate and sensitive writing when I was growing up in Labrador. I was especially impressed with his True North, which I still consider the best and most moving book about Labrador I have ever read. I also see his Labrador works as important documentaries of pioneer days in the North. I had trouble maintaining my objectivity while writing this thesis because I tend to romanticize the pioneer days of Labrador, as do many Labradorians. It was difficult to reach beyond such idealization. However, I wanted to investigate the way an American saw the North in the 1930s and determine whether or not his views differ significantly from how we view ourselves. In this thesis I am attempting to examine how one person imposes his romantic ideals to create his own version of the "true" Labrador.

In the course of this piece of work, I received help from a number of people. I gratefully acknowledge the generous financial support of the Labrador Inuit Association. I especially thank Elliott Merrick for so generously taking the time to correspond with me. I am grateful to Dr. Ronald Rompkey for his patience and invaluable guidance during the writing of this thesis and also for the use of introductory biographical details on Elliott Merrick, excerpted from his introduction to The Long Crossing and Other Labrador Stories. I wish to express my appreciation to the workers at the Queen Elizabeth II Library, particularly those in the Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives. I am also grateful to Dr. Annette Staveley for the

use of her file on Elliott Merrick. I thank Professor Ronald Wallace, Dr. Elizabeth Miller and Dr. Donald Bartlett for their helpful suggestions regarding my thesis. I especially thank Professor Wallace for his courses in Canadian literature, which have so strongly influenced my writing and my thinking. I thank Millicent Blake Loder for so kindly sharing her memories with me. I also wish to acknowledge Sharon Halfyard for her proofreading and encouragement and to express special thanks to Adrian McKeever for printing this thesis and for all his proofreading and printing during the past two years.

ABBREVIATIONS

DB	Dale Blake
EM	Elliott Merrick
<u>FF</u>	<u>Frost and Fire</u>
<u>GMF</u>	<u>Green Mountain Farm</u>
<u>NN</u>	<u>Northern Nurse</u>
<u>TLC</u>	<u>The Long Crossing and Other Labrador Stories</u>
<u>TN</u>	<u>True North</u>

For my family and friends

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INTRODUCTION

Robert Scholes asserts in Fabulation and Metafiction, "In life we do not attain the real. What we reach is a notion of the real which contents us enough so that we can found our behavior upon it" (7). This thesis investigates one man's "notion of the real." It views Elliott Merrick as an artist-adventurer, a self-styled guide to a northern paradise, wanting to crystallize his myths and to preserve and encapsulate a re-invented Labrador.

The thesis examines the Labrador works of Elliott Merrick in terms of the romantic re-employment of his experiences in the North. Just as Hayden White has shown historical narrative to be both "a *reproduction* of the events reported in it" and "a *complex of symbols*" pointing towards a particular story type or mythos (White 88), Merrick's restructuring of Labrador pioneer life may be seen as his re-invention of that life based on his romantic mythos. White also points out that the very language, the figurative discourse that a historian employs, implies a certain employment of events (94), and thus the historian *makes* events into a story by techniques normally found in the employment of a novel or play (84). Similarly, I contend, Merrick transforms what he observes of Labradorian cultures through the imposition of his biases, his interpretation of the truth.

Elliott Merrick's artistic tendencies revealed themselves early in life. He was born in Montclair, New Jersey, on May 11, 1905. As a boy, he loved the out-of-doors and boating, but at sixteen he succumbed to an even greater passion--writing.

He entered Yale in 1923 to study English literature and French and after graduation did nearly three years of newspaper reporting and advertising work. He subsequently resigned and wrote his first book, a biography of the mountain climber Henri Russell, a work later rejected by publishers. The would-be author then decided to sign on as a deckhand on a freighter due to go around the world. But following a disillusioning week aboard ship, without ever leaving Brooklyn, he quit. It was 1929 and Elliott Merrick still craved adventure in some place far away. He made up his mind to do volunteer work with the Grenfell mission in Indian Harbour, Labrador.

That summer Merrick encountered the land destined to influence his life and supply him with so much writing material. At the end of the season he signed on to work full time as a teacher at the mission school in North West River, Labrador, and there met Kate Austen, the Australian nurse who was to become his wife. The trek the two made into the Labrador interior with a trapper guide in 1930-31 provided the material for Merrick's first Labrador book, True North (1933). Their experiences with the trappers, combined with his observations of the lives of central Labradorian pioneers, also yielded much of the background for his 1939 novel Frost and Fire. Kate Austen's adventures as a Labrador nurse later formed the basis for the Merricks' collaborative work, Northern Nurse (1942). Merrick's short stories of the North are collated in the recent publication of The Long Crossing and Other Labrador Stories (1992).

Elliott Merrick's Labrador books and stories carry the stamp of his idealism.

He advocates a simple existence in the out-of-doors and imbues his work with a strong anti-urban attitude. His writing embodies a characteristic American viewpoint, what Leo Marx calls "an inchoate longing for a more 'natural' environment" combined with "the contemptuous attitude that many Americans adopt toward urban life" (Marx 5). Merrick sees northern nature as both an impassive backdrop to the events of his stories and as a romantic lure with the power to destroy or reshape a person's life. His writing contains this basic paradox: while it constantly emphasizes man's insignificance in comparison to nature, it also exuberantly celebrates human accomplishment and growth in northern surroundings.

Chapter One discusses the way that Merrick re-invents Labrador against the background of certain "master stories": stories of the central Labradorian settler-trapper, the Labrador frontierswoman, the Innu, the fur-building empire of the Hudson's Bay Company, and the Grenfell medical mission. Chapter Two continues the examination of the imposition of myth upon Labrador culture in True North, where Merrick constantly celebrates the trappers' way of life in contrast with that of the urban dweller. I compare his accounts of the trapper life with the accounts of others, including the trappers themselves, to demonstrate how Merrick's romanticism and didacticism colour his view of it. This chapter reveals the Merricks following their quest for identity, an endeavour involving emulation of Merrick's ideal northern hero, the settler-trapper. Chapter Three proceeds to show Merrick again drawing upon the stories of the trappers, this time in his fictional work Frost and Fire. Here

he presents new versions of the Labrador pioneer woman and the fur empire in the North, blending fact and fiction to present his own ideas of what constitutes heroism.

Chapter Four investigates further Merrick's habitual handling of mythical ideals, this time in Northern Nurse. It outlines the differences between Merrick's story of his wife and the conventions of women's autobiography. Once again Merrick imposes his own "self," his own distinctive philosophy and style, upon what professes to be his wife's autobiography and projects his notions of northern heroism onto his wife's life. This chapter shows how Kate Austen's nursing career is depicted as a mythic tale in the heroic tradition more typical of men's autobiography.

The last chapter investigates how Merrick differs from other writers who came to explore Labrador in the early 1900s, how he romanticized the land as shaper and re-inventor of character, how he hoped to capture and preserve the land and the life it engendered. Others writing about Labrador did not credit that land with such powers. They were more interested in leaving their imprint upon it in some way. This chapter assesses Merrick's Labrador works, including the short story "The Long Crossing," in terms of how he viewed the landscape as both picturesque and life-threatening.

Robert Kroetsch has argued that the "master stories," the "meta-narratives" of a society, may influence the writing of particular narratives within that society (Kroetsch 21). I argue that Elliott Merrick's own master stories, fostered by the ideals of the "simple life" and the American dream, determined his response to Labrador and its people and his reshaping of the northern meta-narratives he encountered.

CHAPTER ONE

RE-INVENTING LABRADOR

Dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream; both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche. But in the dream the forms are quirked by the peculiar troubles of the dreamer, whereas in myth the problems and solutions shown are directly valid for all mankind.

Joseph Campbell, The Hero With A Thousand Faces (1949).

I. The Romantic Emplotment

The powerful discourse of myth, with its widespread influence, often determines events in a society and shapes the lives of its adherents. A person may be guided by the myths of a culture or by individual "inner myths" adopted through the course of a lifetime. An artist may communicate his or her myths to others, in turn affecting their lives and supplanting their guiding principles. The artist may see this not as proselytizing or subversion, but rather as a kind of deliverance. The pervasive power of myth may cause some to equate legend with existence, and they may even change their lives accordingly. For them, fictional ideas have been translated into fact.

Elliott Merrick's work illustrates such a dialectic between fact and fiction, the romantic ideals which permeate his writing allowing him to "invent" and "re-invent" places and people. He did so under the influence of mythical hopes and dreams that formed a crucial part of his sense of "reality," his version of the "truth." For him,

truth in writing meant a blending of actual and imagined events and characters. As he has stated, "The best nonfiction is so enthralling it's like good fiction, and the best fiction is so convincing, so lifelike and 'authentic' it might very well be real, true-to-life experience. So where is the wide boundary?"¹

Elliott Merrick's writing is worthwhile exploring in terms of his romantic recasting of events, which strongly affected his vision of the North and its inhabitants. He listened to the tales of the Labrador people and reworked them according to his philosophy of life, imposing his own beliefs and ideals in the process. Leon Edel advises the reader to look for the secret fable behind a life, "the myths within and behind the individual, the inner myth we all create in order to live, the myth that tells us we have some being, some selfhood . . ." (Oates 28). Merrick's work shows the strength and influence of his inner myths and the difficulty of arriving at a determinate "truth."

Merrick's narration of the "truth" can be viewed in terms of how Hayden White describes the writing of history. White explores differing versions of reality and the difficulty of separating fact from fiction. He depicts historical narratives as "verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found*"; he sees them as "a conflation of mythic and historical consciousness" (82). White observes historical events made into a "story" by way of certain emplotments which influence the reader's interpretation of events, endowing some of these events with more significance than others. A historian may choose a romantic emplotment over others

(tragic, comic, ironic) which give differing viewpoints on past occurrences. For White, the writing of historical narrative is a literary, or fiction-making, operation (85). Such narrative, charged with certain meanings, contains clues and tropes that colour the reader's perception of history.

Just as a certain structural mode can influence one's ideas of the past, so too can certain attitudes and principles colour an individual's ideas about life. Elliott Merrick's whole existence revolved around a central romantic emplotment which he as a writer imposed upon the lives of others. This philosophy of a self-professed "Thoreau-worshipping 'nature boy'"² prompted Merrick to immerse himself in the northern settler culture. His tendency to idealize caused him to "re-invent" the popular narratives and characters of the North, including his wife and himself. He recast events of the past as a romantic mythos, thus validating his own all-encompassing ideology. An energetic, didactic idealism directed his writing and his life. While others might employ fictions or "inner myths" to give their lives meaning, Merrick seemed to believe that he was guided by a "Truth" that ought to be imparted to others. He was confident that he possessed the secret to "right" living: a simple life in the out-of-doors.

Merrick's unwavering anti-urbanism compelled him to seek that simple life, as well as adventure in the wilds. He arrived in Labrador as a young Yale graduate, seeking somewhere "wild and free" where he could enjoy nature.³ Labrador, that "pristine, beautiful land,"⁴ proved a wellspring of writing material for him, and its

people intrigued him. He wrote detailed descriptions of their simple societies and what he saw as the informing "codes" of their existence, so different from those of urban dwellers. He saw these principles as confirming and reflecting his own.

Merrick's attitudes were shaped long before his arrival in Labrador. He had grown up reading the works of such nature writers as Jack London, Ernest Thompson Seton, and John Muir, and he greatly admired Henry David Thoreau, whose Walden he read avidly.⁵ In fact, his epigraph to True North quotes Thoreau in an exhortation to find *reality* in life--a reality only to be found in nature. The myth of Arcadia, so prevalent in the United States since the turn of the century (Schmitt xvii-xx), no doubt exerted its influence on Merrick as well. The "simple life" had also assumed the status of a cult in America at the end of the 1800s (Shi 176). The city and city life were coming under increased scrutiny during Merrick's formative years, when urban life was often portrayed as fearful. New York City, so close to Merrick's home in Montclair, New Jersey, experienced growing water and sewage problems, traffic snarl-ups, and noise pollution (Schmitt 178).

Against this society he so abhorred, Merrick adopted a Wordsworthian attitude to life: a sense of the power and immensity of nature in comparison to puny mankind. Merrick's descriptions of the wilderness resonate with the kind of "emblematic stillness" attributed to those of Wordsworth (Toliver 238). He captures a sense of Wordsworth's sublime: "a sense of individual form or forms; a sense of duration; and a sense of power."⁶ The outdoors takes on huge significance for him.

However, Merrick does not see nature as symbolic of God, whose existence he doubts. He emphasizes the savagery and danger, the godlessness of the wilderness almost as much as its beauty. While in the midst of the Labrador wilds, Merrick is often brought up short by the harshness of life. He must endure pain and hardship in order to truly experience nature, to reach some transcendent moment. He writes, ". . . to feel a part of it, to be a part of every sand bank and driftwood' stump and shadow of mountain and ripple, costs something" (TN 53). Such transcendence is not linked to conventional religious ideas, for Merrick envisions a merging with a landscape, not with God.

Merrick's desire to merge with nature distinguishes him from other writers using Newfoundland and Labrador for their setting. Writers such as Margaret Duley and Norman Duncan seem to emphasize the fearful power of nature.⁷ Their characters have no great urge to harmonize with it, but merely hope to endure its hardships. Duncan's The Way of the Sea (1903) depicts Newfoundlanders in a constant struggle to subdue their enemy, the ocean, described as "mighty, savage, dread, infinitely treacherous and hateful, yielding only that which is wrested from it, snarling, raging, snatching lives, spoiling souls of their graces" (309). Margaret Duley's Highway to Valour (1941) begins by telling of the devastating effects of a tidal wave flooding over a Newfoundland outport and killing the family of the protagonist, Mageila. Duley conveys a horror of the natural landscape with its violence and dangers. These writers express no desire to feel at one with such dread forces.

The hazards of the Labrador wilderness and the toll it takes upon the body are emphasized by others who explored Labrador's interior, such as Dillon Wallace and J.M. Scott. Wallace's The Lure of the Labrador Wild (1905) tells of vomiting, diarrhea, days of "hard portaging on stomachs crying for food," the men talking of "the homes that were calling to us over the dreary wastes" (182). Scott complains of the flies and speaks of "the ruthless course of natural laws" (26) in The Land That God Gave Cain (1933). He also writes of being cold and hungry and of watching their dogs die of starvation (205). In sharp contrast to such descriptions, Merrick exalts nature's beauty in such romantic passages as this from True North, picturing the northern lights: "The wisps bunched up into a sea of golden radiance directly overhead and, moving like soft, yet swiftest, lightning the breaking sea of light flashed red and green and blue as it slipped into the form of a gigantic, open-petalled rose that burst in blinding light and was gone" (TN 32). Merrick continually emphasizes his love of a beautiful but potentially dangerous wilderness.

II. The Mythical Northland

A vital element in Merrick's vision of the North and its peoples is the physical endurance necessary to really feel a part of this untamed nature, not just survive it. With such endurance, the unimaginable may become real. Merrick sees Labrador with its harsh winters and countless hazards, as a true trying ground. The North, ever ready to punish those who do not respect it, will not tolerate weakness. Merrick

makes of Labrador a new frontier, a mythical "Eden of the North" where new goals and new heights of perception can be attained with success in the physical trials. He envisions the North as transforming people into characters of an heroic myth--if they have the requisite strength and endurance. Labrador means magic for Merrick, a tonic for the world's ills, a place where dreams may possibly come true.

Part of Labrador's exotic attraction for Merrick lay in its culture. He was especially captivated by the settlers of central Labrador, for him proof that the North produces a special and hardy people. As Allison Mitcham has observed, a common belief about the North is that it demands "preservation of such qualities as generosity, trust, and loyalty as the price of survival" (Mitcham 19). The settlers epitomized these qualities for Merrick, particularly the trappers, with their creed of being "all brothers in the river" (FF 183). A fascination with the trapper "meta-narrative" and other master stories of the North permeates Elliott Merrick's Labrador works.

The North proves to be fertile ground for such "meta-narratives," for what Robert Kroetsch sees as the assumed, traditional, shared stories of a culture (Kroetsch 21). These epic stories, often basic to nationhood, usually involved great heroes, great dangers, great quests and goals. Kroetsch cites the American Dream, "with its assumptions about individual freedom, the importance of the frontier, the immigrant experience, as it functions in the literature of the United States" (21). Although this accepted ideal often differed hugely from real-life experience in America, its emphasis on the frontier doubtless influenced Merrick's views of the "great tales" of Labrador--

tales based on pioneer hardihood and heroism.

Merrick witnessed Labradorians living in a primitive environment where events took on larger-than-life proportions, where a short trip to a nearby community could mean death, where people and news were of paramount importance in the midst of isolation. Harry Paddon⁸ attests in Green Woods and Blue Waters (1989) that ". . . everything 'outside' was so remote and incomprehensible that little realization of any way of life but our own could penetrate the quiet solitude of home" (10). Such isolation inspired heroic stories of the North, of dangers survived and fears conquered. It nurtured what Kroetsch refers to as a "local pride" that enables people to create their own culture. Events take on the attributes of folklore and myth as an oral tradition "points us back to our own landscape, our recent ancestors, and the characteristic expressions and modes of our own speech" (Kroetsch 6-7).

Similarly, Northrop Frye refers to this kind of myth-making in an isolated environment. He relates it to a "garrison mentality" prone to develop in small, solitary communities like those in the North. Surrounded by a physical frontier, people are "compelled to feel a great respect for the law and order that holds them together, yet [are] confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting. . . ." In this tight-knit society, moral and social values are unquestionable. As the society develops, "its mythical stories become structural principles of storytelling, its mythical concepts . . . become habits of metaphorical thought" (Frye 289, 295).

The idiosyncrasies of Merrick's romantic personality explain his own attraction to such mythical stories. However, his romanticism stopped short of belief in an afterlife. His imagination transformed events and people, but without the intrusion of religious sentiment. Merrick gloried in nature, in the "here and now." In describing one trapper's difficult existence, Merrick wrote, "God, if there is one, gave him grit, and slowly broke him to pieces" (TN 177). Erik Erikson postulates that man's creation of myths, "of 'ideal' realities in which we become and remain the central reality," is juxtaposed with the awful awareness that "our nonexistence is . . . entirely possible" (Erikson 111). Merrick's combination of idealism and agnosticism led him to emphasize the importance of living life to the full and enjoying the present day. The lives of the Labrador settlers were ideal and 'real' ones to Merrick, conducive to tales of amazing physical endurance and adventure in the wilds.

Having lived in suburbia most of his life, he must have been impressed with what others, used to a northern existence, may have seen as routine events rather than superhuman achievements. Certainly, the settlers did not take for granted Merrick's assertions that they were superior to city people. Of the trapper John Groves, Merrick wrote, "One cannot convince him of the inferiority of the people from away" (TN 256). But Merrick grew up listening to his father read Robin Hood and Roland (TN 336), and, lying alone in a tilt up by Grand River, he felt "like Daniel Boone or Kit Carson, or somebody who amounted to something" (TN 136). To him, taking on trappers' attributes transformed his existence into the stuff of myth and magic.

III. Re-inventing the Meta-narratives

Merrick's myth-making may also be traced to the Wordsworthian impulses that guided him. Merrick's artistic sensibilities and strong emotional connection to the settlers coloured his stories about Labrador society. It remains difficult to say how much Merrick "creates" of the Labradorians' meta-narratives and where the frontier lies between fact and fiction in his portrayal of these people. Merrick was keenly interested in the master stories subscribed to by the Labradorians themselves. However, it is impossible to determine how much of what he wrote about them is translated through his own governing "inner stories."

Merrick's writing shows a tendency towards broad generalizations about people. He posits a uniformity of human nature within a particular culture, connected perhaps with the idea that survival in the North often depends on everyone working together in certain prescribed roles. Merrick concentrates on a "type" and permits little deviation from that type. For one who allows for the blurring of fact and fiction in writing, his books seem to view life in terms of binary oppositions: materialism and anti-materialism, urban and rural, strength and weakness. The marginalized have little place in Merrick's invention and re-invention of the meta-narratives of Labrador. At least this was the case in his writing. In real life, Merrick seemed to sympathize with those who did not fit in, like the settler Philemon Blake, whose artistic temperament prevented him from finding a niche in North West River. Merrick saw something of himself in this man because, as he states, "I was like Pleeman in

N.W.R. I didn't fit. Yet I hardly ever do fit. Does anybody?"⁹ This concern for the "outsider" is rarely expressed in his work, perhaps because it does not serve his purpose of eulogizing the Labrador settlers' way of life.

That way of life strongly affected the young American. Culture can be a commanding influence, with its power to sway opinion and influence behaviour. As Edward Said writes, culture designates "not merely something to which one belongs but something that one possesses"; it also signifies forcefully what is excluded from it (Said 8-9). Merrick was tied to his native American culture by filiation, by birth and nationality. In Labrador he became at least temporarily affiliated with the settler culture, especially that of the settler-trapper. While the trappers might have perceived themselves as doing only what was necessary to feed their families, Merrick exalted them as heroes in the wilderness and sought to emulate them. After his trip up Grand River,¹⁰ Merrick wrote, "We knew before that they were remarkable men, but now we know they are supermen" (TN 323). As Said asserts, "affiliation can easily become a system of thought no less orthodox and dominant than culture itself" (20). True North sees Merrick adopting the viewpoint of what he seems to consider the superior society of the area--that of the settler and trapper.

The conventional story about these settlers was that they were diligent, God-fearing people, generally hard workers.¹¹ Their ancestors had come to Labrador from Europe in the early 1800s and had taken native women as wives. The settlers inherited skills of Europeans along with traits borrowed from both the Inuit and Innu

cultures. They were described as "bound by their own internally generated set of customs," and their children had the maturity and skills of adults by the age of fourteen or fifteen (Zimmerly 158, 163). Merrick was later to describe these inhabitants of Hamilton Inlet as "an almost unique, unified group of people who sang and worked and died in a way that was harmonized with nature, and they were happy while they were doing it. They were the happiest people we have ever known. . . . I often wondered why they, with so little, were happier than Americans, who have so much; and could only decide that they are closer to the truth" (GMF 171). Yet he avowed on the same page that "I do not idealize them" and qualified his statement by admitting that not all of them were happy, "not those who died of 'T.B. bones.'" Nevertheless Merrick intimates throughout his Labrador books that the settler life should be emulated and respected.

He especially admired the settler men. They trapped in the interior of Labrador for several months of the year in order to support their wives and children, who remained in the Hamilton Inlet area during their absence. The trapper led a strenuous existence, carrying or hauling all his things as he travelled from one tilt to the next. At day's end "he cut a supply of firewood, ate his supper consisting of bread and beans cooked the previous day, skinned and cleaned his catch . . . and then relied on the warmth of the stove alone to keep himself from freezing in the below-zero temperatures of the Labrador hinterlands" (Zimmerly 75). By 1900, according to Zimmerly, the basic motivating ideology of the central Labrador people was

nevertheless "to become a trapper, raise a large family and someday make a real killing in furs." Women hoped to marry successful trappers, raise large families and someday have easier lives than did their mothers (164).

The settler women were conventionally described as hard-working and versatile trappers' wives who looked after their families alone for months at a time while their men were in the interior.¹² The trapper's wife "worked equally hard and developed exceptional endurance and strength of will in what were often unimaginably difficult periods" (Zimmerly 209). Merrick built upon this established idea of the Labrador frontierswoman to make of her "a remarkable person," doing "more work than it would seem possible for one human being to accomplish," yet mostly "very happy" (IN 108, 110).

Merrick's affiliation with the settler culture may have influenced his opinion of the Indians of Labrador, as well as his presentation of their society. He seems to adopt the viewpoint of his trapper friends concerning the Innu. The Montagnais Indians were nomads who hunted the area south and west of Grand River and sometimes came out on the north shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence (Zimmerly 115-16). They emerged in the North West River area to trade at the fur posts there. By 1900, with the settlers encroaching more and more on what were once Innu trapping grounds, "the Indians were complaining to the Hudson's Bay Company . . . and several incidents occurred" (Zimmerly 146). Conflicting stories abound as to whether the trappers or the Indians were to blame for such incidents, which usually involved

the theft of trappers' fur or food; some denied that any conflicts had occurred.¹³

Although Merrick empathizes with the Innu, his view of them in True North does not appear wholly sympathetic. He sees the Innu as impractical and implies that their different philosophy may result in their extinction. "They are children, careless of the morrow and forever scornful of the whites," he writes in True North. "One cannot but admire them in a way. It takes a certain kind of courage to forget tomorrow. They would rather die than change, and they are dying, I am afraid" (TN 104-05).

Interwoven closely with the master stories of the Innu and settlers is that of the fur empire, especially as exemplified by the Hudson's Bay Company. Merrick portrays the trading establishments as greedy and unscrupulous. Zimmerly writes that the Hudson's Bay Company was generally thought to have a stabilizing effect on the Hamilton Inlet area and people (86). But a skilled fur trapper "held a more favorable position than others when he sought help in an emergency, or asked for ordinary credit" (Kleivan 129). The Hudson's Bay Company concentrated on the fur trade, with the sole intention of profiting by it (Kennedy 31). The relationship between the company and the trapper was "analogous to the debt-peonage system common in Latin America" (Brice-Bennett 281), and each year the trapper was usually further in debt.

Merrick's trading companies symbolize the materialistic business world against which he often preaches. Although he has acknowledged that individual Hudson's Bay Company factors were sometimes "extremely fine" individuals and that "the Hudson's Bay Company tided people over many winters in desperate conditions,"¹⁴ he pictures

the unpleasant side of the fur empire in his books. This narrow view served to validate his philosophy of the simple life.

Merrick's portrayal of the Grenfell mission fits in with his anti-materialism. His True North makes little mention of it, as reviewer Daines Barrington (The Saturday Review of Literature 1 April 1933) pointed out, ". . . tantalizingly, [there is] not a word of Grenfell beyond the bare statement that his wife was a Grenfell nurse and that both of them had worked at the Mission for two years. Is it because the International Grenfell Association, to his mind, is vulgarizing a primitive land and people. . . ?" It was through that association that Merrick first went to Labrador, and his later book Northern Nurse does indeed support the general viewpoint of the time about it: that it was a committed and self-sacrificing organization greatly benefiting Labradorians. Merrick describes its health services, clubs, and clothing drives (NN 211). He details many of the cases handled by his wife in her capacity as a hard-working, dedicated nurse with the Grenfell organization. Northern Nurse does contain a hint of patronization by a few of the mission staff, such as when a settler woman refuses help from the nurse in caring for her baby because "some former mission worker had been superior to her, and Mae had taken offense" (NN 120). A conflicting meta-narrative of the Grenfell organization, now competing with the old one, portrays it as overbearing, elitist and fostering an overdependence on it by the people of the area (Plaice 39-41). But this was certainly not the dominant view in the 1930s, nor is it adopted in Merrick's books.

Sir Wilfred Grenfell was revered in his day by the Labrador people and had indeed become mythologized in America and Great Britain. He had in fact "acquired the quality of a folk hero" (Rompkey 223). Northern Nurse portrays him as an interested, eclectic humanitarian, but Merrick gives no glowing, overt tribute to him. Nevertheless, he certainly does not detract from the usual picture of Grenfell as hero. He met Grenfell personally and admired him as a "miracle worker" for raising the funds that he did for the Mission. However, Merrick now criticizes his foolhardiness for going out on bad ice and having to be rescued. Both he and his wife also had reservations about Grenfell's authoritarian air, which gave "a slight chill, no matter how superficially warm."¹⁵ Merrick asserts that despite this, "the authoritarian way is the way to get things done" and that Grenfell and other doctors "bent over backward to avoid" making the native people dependent.¹⁶ His books do not question the Grenfell master story.

As has been earlier pointed out, Merrick often criticizes urban society in his writing; he contributes to an anti-urban tenet prevalent in America at the time. A Yale graduate in English, Merrick must have been influenced by nineteenth-century American literature, a literature "powerfully grounded . . . in the implications and assumptions of American Romanticism" and with "special interests in and definitions of self, freedom, heroism, society, nature, happiness" (Kroetsch 51). He equates city dwelling with imprisonment and his oft-expressed, vehement anti-urbanism serves as a marked contrast to his praise of the settler way of life and his romantic descriptions of

nature. His books contain many disparaging comments about city living, seen as mundane, worthless, and demeaning.

Merrick sums up his ideas succinctly in a comment to a Labrador trapper, as reported in True North: "I told him he was quite right and that he and his people were infinitely superior in character and honesty, happier and wiser how to truly live than the men in the cities" (TN 9). Such generalizations are common in Merrick's Labrador books, giving the impression of an author convinced that his own ideas were the "true" ones. Merrick implies that his perceptions of a society are valid, sensible and applicable to all members of that society. Such an attitude promotes the legitimacy of genuine, "true" master stories of a culture.

IV. The Power of Myth

The events of individual lives may depend on a belief in the popular ideals of a society. Although Robert Kroetsch believes that it is a Canadian strategy of survival to refuse privilege to restrictive meta-narratives (Kroetsch 23), ironically the opposite may have been true in Labrador. The trappers' adherence to their code and their pride in their legendary endurance may have pushed them to persevere when otherwise they might have given up and died. Given the power of such master stories, an associative and compelling authority pervades Merrick's adaptation of them. Possibly Merrick's version of a master narrative is no less "real" or influential than the conventional one. Hayden White states that ". . . there is no value-neutral mode of emplotment,

explanation, or even description of any field of events, whether imaginary or real . . ." (White 129).

However, White also states categorically that "no one and nothing *lives* a story" (111). Merrick's work and, indeed, his life may disprove this notion. Georges Gusdorf writes that "man . . . is the essential agent in bringing about the situations in which he finds himself placed. It is his intervention that structures the terrain where his life is lived and gives it its ultimate shape, so that the landscape is truly . . . 'a state of the soul'" (Olney 37). Elliott Merrick re-invented himself as a hero. Instead of remaining as a drudge in the city, he struck out on his own to seek his dream. His journey up Grand River bears some remarkable resemblances to that mythological journey of the hero, to the monomyth known worldwide.¹⁷

In True North, Merrick reconstructs himself as an heroic figure. Like the hero of a romance, he receives a call to adventure to a place of superhuman deeds (Labrador). His protector on his hero-quest is the trapper guide, John Michelin. The trip described in True North is Merrick's passing of a threshold: "the adventure of the hero represents the moment in his life when he achieved illumination . . ." (J. Campbell 259). After his hard rite of passage, he declared that he and his wife were "not the same people we were in the fall" and that "we shall never be in despair again now we know there are truth and simplicity and beauty, that they can be found, not so much in a geographical place as in the way of life such places bring about" (TN 311-12). His trip up Grand River and his stay in Labrador gave final shape to the

philosophy of his life. He always advocated and tried to live a relatively simple existence, enjoying nature.¹⁸ Like a true modern hero, he proceeded to enlighten others through his writing.

Myths, after all, are not just "symptoms of the unconscious . . . but also controlled and intended statements of certain spiritual principles . . ." (J. Campbell 257). If Merrick was able to live his own dream, why should he not believe that others could also? And who is to say they did not? One cannot readily examine another's "inner myths"; neither can one easily disprove them. A certain naivety about the outside world may be conducive to myth-making habits of mind. Merrick visited Labrador in much simpler times, before the onslaught of the postmodern era. The influence of the world beyond Labrador remained minimal in the 1930s, and people lived in insular societies, with their own ideas and principles. Present-day Labradorians witness a much changed society, but nostalgia for the old days and respect for past ideals persist. The tales are still told, and the old meta-narratives are kept alive by a still strong local pride.¹⁹

The power and influence of myth and meta-narrative cannot be denied; nor can the boundary between fact and fiction be easily delineated, as Merrick's writing shows. For Merrick, his rendition of the truth was valid. His self-assurance and obvious enjoyment of life, joined with his romantic, heroic tales, evoke some of the same consuming power of the age-old monomyth. His books and stories raise some intriguing questions: Why should one person's "truth" be deemed any less significant

than another's? Is it indeed possible to "live a story"? Elliott Merrick's Labrador books demonstrate forcibly the extent to which myth invades and indeed determines "reality."

The next chapter investigates that infusion of "reality" with mythical ideals in Elliott Merrick's first Labrador book, True North. It explores the infiltration of the "Merrick myths" into the master stories of the Labrador trappers, whom Merrick sees as living proof of the validity of his "truth." His distinctive philosophy is strengthened by his experiences with them, and he in turn imposes his notions of heroism upon the events of their lives. It is through emulation of these heroes, both morally and physically, that he hopes to achieve his dream: to find happiness and "reality" in a simple life in the northern wilderness. Through the trappers he hopes to discard the disguises and pretensions of urban society. Chapter Two witnesses the start of Merrick's re-invention of Labrador and observes the beginnings of what I call the "Merrick northern mythology."

CHAPTER TWO

TRUE NORTH: THE DREAM REALIZED

I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. . . . I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

Henry David Thoreau, Walden (1854).

Elliott Merrick's mythical ideals governed his actions and influenced his whole life. Like other romantics before him, he grew disillusioned with a conventional urban existence and longed for travel and adventure. Merrick's early life in many respects resembled that of Ernest Hemingway. Both men grew up in well-to-do American families and chafed under the confines of their society. Both did stints working as newspaper reporters while honing their writing skills. Hemingway eventually travelled to Europe, Merrick to Labrador; they were later to sign up with Scribner's, to be managed by the same editor, Maxwell Perkins. Both looked to nature as a source of power and inspiration. For them, struggling with the elements engendered a special kind of heroism, a daring search for self-realization. As Hemingway was to show so vividly in The Old Man and the Sea (1952), returning to nature often entails a testing of one's endurance, even a quest for one's true self. Elliott Merrick's True North transmits the same message. So was launched the career of Merrick the storyteller and

legend-weaver, the chronicler of heroism.

As the Depression in the United States left people destitute and without hope, Elliott Merrick's True North offered its readers "a world of joy and beauty and friendship and fortitude."¹ Tinged with romanticism, this travel journal created a mythology, a powerful meta-narrative of the settler-trappers of central Labrador. It rendered the impossible possible, held up an inspiring ideal, and offered respite from a cynical and defeated society. Its story was so appealing that the urban and urbane Maxwell Perkins, during a lunch in New York City, queried, "Is there anything I could do in Labrador to make a living?"²

Early in his book, Merrick eulogized the trappers: ". . . to us they were a song, an inspiration. They were kinder and stronger than we and wiser in the business of living" (TN 9). He went on to champion their culture in the pages of True North and to contrast their simple existence with that of urban dwellers, doomed to the prison of the city and to the narrowness of a materialistic lifestyle. His engrossing tales of the trappers provided examples of how best to live, how best to achieve that "reality" lauded by Thoreau in the epigraph to True North. Their stories and what he learned about them during his difficult journey remained engraved in Merrick's mind.

The trapper mythology gripped True North's reviewers as well, though some did not entirely subscribe to Merrick's idealization of the North. His book was variously described as "well-written" (Barrington, The Saturday Review of Literature 1 Apr. 1933), "an excellent account of the lives of trappers" (Innis, Canadian

Historical Review 1934) and "a book of exceptional quality" (Duffus, The New York Times Book Review 5 Mar. 1933). Gannett (New York Herald Tribune 27 Feb. 1933) called True North "a book to set on your shelves beside Walden and John Muir." Its vivid descriptions and enchanting quality were emphasized. The New York Sun referred to it as "a prose song of the enchantments of the North." The 1934 Canadian Historical Review's Jenness wrote that Merrick "was enchanted by this pioneer district . . . and he has transferred some of the enchantment to his book."

A less laudatory review still regarded True North as charming despite its being "so utterly naive." The reviewer (The Saturday Review of Literature 1934) believed that Merrick went too far in his praise of the Labrador wilderness and was affronted by Merrick's assertion of the inferiority of people outside Labrador. Another critic in The New Republic (1933) stated that Merrick "makes his point in excellent narrative, marred occasionally by rhetorical excess." Duffus, in The New York Times Book Review, thought Merrick's doctrine might seem "adolescent to cautious middle age." Jenness wrote that "perhaps he is a little too idealistic," yet allowed that Merrick expressed "poetic rhapsodies" and an "infectious" idealism.

True North combined down-to-earth practicality with praise of mythical goals, resulting in reviews which commended its common sense approach but at the same time acclaimed it healthy escapist literature. Daines Barrington's 1933 review referred to True North as "a useful book," combining "an interesting narrative with a practical handbook." The New York Sun described it as "rich in woodcraft and natural

history." H.A. Innis, of the Canadian Historical Review, saw it as "primarily valuable as a first-hand detailed account of trapping in this region." The reviews also made mention of its relationship to the times in which it was published. R.L. Duffus ended his commentary with the view that the transcendental beauty of the North described by Merrick "is probably a pretty good thing for people living in a deflated and hysterical civilization to be thinking about." Lewis Gannett wrote that "it is a fine book for New Yorkers to read in the midst of their Depression." The New Republic referred to True North as "a success story of escape." The New York Sun viewed the Merricks as having discovered "calm and content and a joy of living," with "the world of turmoil" far behind them. Duffus wrote that Merrick "offers a vicarious kind of escape" through his book. Daines Barrington saw the land and people of Labrador as Merrick's "escape from urban noise and pretension."

But Merrick himself took great exception to the interpretation of his work as escapist literature, complaining that "there are a few steam-heated reviewers who persistently call my tales of the modern frontier or rugged living 'escapist'." He saw his journey not as an imposition of his own mythical hopes on Labrador cultures, but as going "from unreality to reality, and from an unsuitable life to one that is rich and deeply natural."³ To Merrick, the central Labrador trappers were genuine heroes. Typically of his writing, romanticism and realism merge in True North, tales of hardships counterbalanced by poetic descriptions of nature. His book offered this combination of realism and fantasy to American readers of the Thirties who sought

hope as well as distraction. Harvey Swados wrote that what inspired the best writing of the Depression years was a "humanity, this searching not for absurdity but for meaningfulness" (xxxiii). True North depicted a young man's search for identity and meaning in a gruelling environment; it was a quest permeated with optimism and a sincere interest in other human beings. It rejected materialism and constantly criticized American urban society. It praised stalwart trappers who had their own code of living and whose unpretentious, simple life was the antithesis of the money-grubbing big business world from which the young Merrick had emerged.

The aim of Merrick and his wife Kate was to try for a "taste of the life, the sweet, soft balsam in the tent, the trappers' camaraderie and jokes, the hard, simple life, 'all brothers in the river'. . . ." (TN 26). On September 11, 1930, they left North West River for their four-month trek into the Labrador interior and back. With them as their guide was the man who epitomises trapper valour for Merrick: John Michelin, described as "a devil-may-care young Hercules" (TN 17). The suggestion of extraordinary, mythical strength is thus introduced early in True North.

During the journey, Merrick jotted down his impressions in a black loose-leaf notebook, which he likens to Wordsworth's "recollections in tranquillity."⁴ His notes were later to be reworked into True North and combined with tales of the trappers, with their courage, vigour and kindness. The Merricks had joined them in a struggle with the elements in which there was neither time nor room for incompetence. It was unusual for these men to have two outsiders with them, let alone a woman. Michelin's

half-brother Robert and a few other trappers joined him and the Merricks on the first leg of the trek. During the journey Merrick described the feats of trackers into the Labrador interior (TN 48) as well as the hardiness of such pioneers as the settler-trapper John Groves (TN 254-56). Merrick tells of Robert Michelin, the wounded war hero who was told he could never trap again. Writes Merrick, "He told them to go to hell. . . . He's done forty miles a day since" (TN 23). Particular instances of trapper stoicism take on epic overtones in True North.

With such instances of moral and physical strength, Elliott Merrick contributes to the powerful meta-narrative of the trappers. He sees the endurance of such men as having to do with "their Labradorman's code that says, 'I am not tired, I am not hungry, I am steel'" (TN 56). Working to the limit becomes a habit with them. Their code prevents them from hunting on Sundays (at least not with their own guns). It also means that no man knowingly leaves a trap set when he will not be returning soon to the trapping grounds.

Merrick continues with examples of their ingenuity and honour. He lists their home remedies and their use of the nature around them (TN 130-32). He writes of their remarkable pictorial memories, their scrupulous honesty, their respectful and spartan father-and-son relationships. Maxims abound. Labradormen do not baby themselves and "seldom ask if one is tired" (TN 159). They never kill for fun but "kill because they must; and there is nothing evil about it" (TN 169). "A Labrador boy is a man at fifteen" (TN 182). Labrador is a land where "a man lives by his two

strong iron fists" (TN 173). Merrick tells of meeting the young trapper Harvey Goudie: "It was like meeting one of God's elect; a picturesque, iron pioneer, intelligent in a world of blind instinct, kind in a world of tooth and claw, full of fun in a life of hardship. I felt like a boy with hero-worshipitis again, though he is two years younger than I am" (TN 182).

By contrast, Merrick's view of the Labrador Innu seems ambivalent. Having heard the trappers' stories of Indians ransacking their tilts (TN 294) and taking their food (TN 38), Merrick's attitude to them is not entirely charitable in True North. He briefly refers to the Indians' resentment of the encroachment of the trappers (TN 61), but does not dwell on this point. Instead he emphasizes the Indians' child-like disregard for the future. Paradoxically, however, he comments on October 18 that he, Kate, and John "live like Indians in every way we can, for they know best" (TN 74). Merrick differs from John in that he would give less instead of more to improvident Innu who, near starvation every winter, eat up the precious flour in the trappers' tilts (TN 101-02). Merrick's viewpoint may have been shaped by his proximity to the trappers, whom he saw as superior in most respects and whose lifestyle he wholeheartedly embraced. In a recent letter, he is more philosophical:

. . . in the 5000 years of Innu hunting-nomad life in the wilds of Canada, evolving the truly wonderful snowshoe-and-toboggan for winter travel and the miraculous canoe for summer, the Indian did have territorial rivalries and limits and rights, but not our rigid personal property laws and rigid customs. He did not 'own' portions of the earth's surface or its wildlife or fish or wood or lakes. . . . He was quite humble about the world of nature he lived in, never assuming a caribou or rabbit or item of food was his. . . . Also, the

trapper had a 'surplus' of food (flour), whereas the Indian was on the verge of starving.⁵

Merrick's tales of the trapper life corroborate in many respects trappers' personal accounts. The information he gives about their day-to-day chores, their customs and habits, proves accurate. It is the glowing, romantic tone of his book which blurs the boundaries between myth and historical fact. His narration contrasts sharply with trappers' own matter-of-fact reports of life up Grand River.

That life, with its portaging, poling and tracking up that river, is described typically by trapper Horace Goudie.⁶ He also mentions his kinsman Harvey Goudie, this time as an old man going up to his trapping grounds, not having seen them for twelve to fifteen years. Harvey knew the exact spot where he had left a trap so many years before. Horace Goudie remarks on the trip out of the Labrador interior in January, the same adventurous and risky path described by Merrick in True North: "But this was our way of life, we took the good with the bad and when it was all hammered up together it's a wonderful life. . . . It was hard work, sometimes slavery, but average it all up and there's no life like it" (12).

Although trappers' stories confirmed those of Merrick in many respects, it is unlikely that they viewed themselves as mythical supermen for living as they did. Their stories emphasize the hard lives they led. The trapper Mark Blake, in an account reminiscent of Merrick's story of Willie Montague (TN 90-91), cites an example of the trappers' kindness and brotherliness. When one of the other trappers

in the area discovered that Blake had frozen his foot, a group of them hauled him out on a flat sled every day for six or seven days.⁷ Harvey Goudie in 1975 told of having to "cache stuff so the Indians couldn't find it. . . . They'd take whatever grub they could get their hands on."⁸ Some trappers, like Hayward Groves, admitted that they "found trappin' an awful lonely life. . . . You went whether you liked it or not."⁹ The dangers of the trapping life were often mentioned. The drowning of Fred Goudie in the river is described by Harvey Goudie¹⁰ as Merrick described John Montague's drowning (TN 36).

Other writers also expressed interest in the trappers of the early 1900s in Labrador, but they often lacked intimate knowledge of the trapper culture, or else their accounts appeared cold or condescending. J.M. Scott, who made an expedition to Labrador in 1928-29, lamented the trappers' fate. He viewed them as destroying the economic possibilities of the trapping industry by having too many offspring amongst whom the trapping grounds had to be shared. He believed the trappers had a good chance of physical survival and that they would not degenerate mentally. However, he feared that outside influence would destroy the character of North West River and render it the same as any other small town (Scott 258). Pinsent described the half-breeds of Hamilton Inlet as "docile, decent and intelligent. . . . On the whole they make out a tolerably comfortable living" (Zimmerly 124). The settlers were "frugal, moral, willing, good tempered and naturally intelligent," according to A.P. Low, with "their only fault, want of thrift and providence" (Zimmerly 140). John

Parsons claims that the Indians and the white man in Labrador have always had cordial relations over the years (Parsons 267). Merrick prides himself on not taking the usual tone of outsiders towards the Labradorians. He calls himself one of the "Come From Aways" who does not condescend, as did so many others.¹¹

Certainly Merrick's attitude towards John Michelin was far from supercilious, Michelin being the essential hero of True North. Merrick's depiction of him using a rock for a pillow (TN 51) echoes the real-life description of trapper Stewart Michelin using a chunk of wood on which to rest his head.¹² Merrick refers to John's "superhuman strength" (TN 55) in carrying huge loads across the portages. Again and again he demonstrates his endurance. When recovering from illness, John ties a handkerchief around his aching head and sets off to hunt (TN 75), and when sick or tired, he travels faster (TN 263). His physical appearance is striking: Merrick pictures him hauling his sled, "with his powerful head and neck thrust forward, his short massive legs pushing him on like the driving rods of a locomotive" (TN 288). Michelin has the usual accurate pictorial memory of the trappers and the ability to move silently, almost magically, in the darkness. He delights in the trappers' tall tales and enjoys telling stories of his own ingenuity. Merrick praises John's quick thinking: when a piece of ice crashes under his feet, he throws his axe ashore before jumping after it (TN 138). Michelin shows his individuality by differing markedly from many other trappers and his American charges in his attitude towards the Innu. He dances for joy upon meeting an Indian family and invites them to tea, explaining, "I love

Indians" (TN 96). Merrick continues to admire John despite their differences. Proof of his reaching into the heroic realm of the trapper is his journal entry of December 27, when he thinks to himself, "Oh John, my brother, something between us is stronger than hate and as deep as the sleep that buries us" (TN 242).

J.M. Scott's acquaintance with John Michelin certainly did not lead Scott to romanticize him. His view of him was considerably more detached than that of Merrick. Rather than joying in Michelin's heroism, daring and courage, he saw Michelin as foolhardy and irresponsible:

He was a strange kind of trapper, lazy by nature but capable of tremendous exertion when challenged or inspired by a sudden desire to get somewhere. He was without a family or a care in the world and responsible not even to himself. Reckless and popular in the settlement, reckless on thin ice and spring rivers; always noisy, always vulgar and more than a little mad. He was full of practical jokes and was never so happy as when engaged in some trial of strength; lying on his face and struggling up with someone sitting on his head. He was the very opposite of his half-brother Robert. Robert travelled with us, steady and silent, while John made our lives a cheerful burden whenever we were at Northwest River (90-91).

It is noteworthy that John Michelin was unmarried when Scott met him, whereas he had a wife and child by the time he guided the Merricks up Grand River. J. M. Scott also did not know Michelin as well as did Merrick. Possibly John Michelin modified his behaviour because of Kate Merrick's presence. Certainly he seemed to encourage Kate more than the other trappers to enter their world. Early in the Merricks' trip, when others accompanied them, John encouraged Kate to try to steer one of the toughest places in Grand River. Merrick writes that another trapper,

Fred Goudie, later warned him against letting John take such chances with his wife (TN 47). Merrick ignored this advice, giving one of his characteristic didactic asides to the reader: "Why should it be considered touching and beautiful when husbands coddle their wives into a state of whining incompetency? Why should wives teach their husbands to be careful?" (TN 48). John Michelin, in the years after the Merricks' departure from the North, eventually became a well-known and respected guide into Labrador's interior.

Merrick was not the only author to impose his heroic ideals on the meta-narratives of Labrador. His John Michelin resembles in many ways the hero Esau Gillingham of Harold Horwood's novel White Eskimo (1972). Horwood, like Merrick, is attracted to the mythical and against "this miserable age of moneygrubbers and technocrats--anti-heroes all . . ." (Horwood 217). He too sets his book in Labrador: the places are real, the story fictional. Gillingham, the white trapper hero of the story, is also physically striking: "shaggy, picturesque, heroic . . . perhaps six and a half feet tall . . . must have weighed over two hundred and fifty pounds. . . . With his bold, far-seeing blue eyes, high brow, and blond hair falling to his shoulders, he looked rather like an idealized Viking" (10). Horwood glorifies him still more as belonging to an age of gods and heroes, like Richard the Lion-Heart, Jason, or Gilgamesh (3). However, Gillingham, unlike Michelin, is a self-conscious hero, one who "hopes to leave a legend behind him . . ." (128). And, like Merrick, Gillingham is an outsider wanting to be assimilated into a Labrador culture.

While Merrick's heroic meta-narratives of Michelin and the trappers transmit his own moral messages and disparage urban life, Horwood's Gillingham criticizes modern bureaucracy, as well as the missionaries and medical people who dealt with the Inuit in Labrador. Both Horwood and Merrick romanticize Labrador and its peoples. Merrick draws upon and embellishes the settler-trapper meta-narrative, while Horwood re-invents the meta-narrative of the Inuit, a people he describes as "simple in soul" (59), irrepressibly cheerful (38), and with strong connections to the land.

True North and White Eskimo employ a mix of romanticism and didacticism to showcase their heroes, but Horwood's hero disappears in the wilderness, succumbing to the power of nature. Nevertheless, he does succeed in leaving a legend behind him. Merrick transforms the Labrador trappers into legends as well, but he also demonstrates that their heroism is within the grasp of other people (such as Merrick and his wife). In True North a mythical existence becomes a real possibility, at least temporarily. True North tells of real-life experiences: the Merricks actually entered the trappers' world and learned from it. They themselves became heroes.

However, Merrick does not refer to himself as a hero in his book. He does set himself up from the start as teacher-narrator, with his informative asides about trapper duties and culture. Moralizing digressions pepper his journal entries as he reiterates his own inner myths. Although Merrick denies wanting to teach lessons through his books,¹³ he seems to exhort his readers to dare to be as courageous as his characters and experience life to the full. He delivers many pitying and disparaging comments on

the anti-heroes, those who choose to remain trapped in an urban existence. Merrick himself decided to escape harried city living and head for Labrador, where "the primitive hard life seems to produce character as civilized existence cannot" (TN 8). Merrick tells John Michelin that he came from a place where people pay for the bad-tasting drinking water that they get, and John's response is duly noted: "What fools they must be. I wouldn't live in a place like that" (TN 40). Whenever Merrick is portrayed as feeling tired or depressed during his strenuous Labrador trip, he thinks of the rush and crowds of the city and feels better. He often injects such aphorisms as "I've heard it said that the country makes men and the city uses them, and I know it is so" (TN 136).

Because of the essential optimism and exuberance of Merrick's writing, such moralizing does not translate into heavyhandedness in True North. His philosophy becomes more persuasive as the journey continues and the reader witnesses Kate's and Elliott's own transformation under the influence of the Labrador trappers. The two also take on heroic attributes and suffer physical tribulations. Merrick experiences a cut eye, chops his foot accidentally, and shoots himself in the thigh. Kate cuts her thumb with an axe. The woman whom Merrick calls his "marvelously hardy wife"¹⁴ enters a male world, taking on men's roles and keeping up with their pace. Merrick also pushes himself to live up to the trapper ideal. Early in the book he sets forth a central theme of True North--that men and women "should teach each other to dare, not to fear. For to dare is to grow" (TN 48).

The couple valued their experience as a journey of the soul as well as of the body. By entering a man's world, Kate Merrick brought herself spiritually closer to her husband. The pronoun "we" appears often in this book. Such an adventure of togetherness exhilarated Merrick almost beyond words. In a January diary entry he tells of looking at Kate, marvelling at the womanliness she retains despite being almost as physically hardy as a man (TN 275). For Merrick, his wife embodies his own heroic standards of northern womanhood, ideals which he was to praise again in his later work, Northern Nurse. Kate Merrick modelled herself after the trappers' wives, independent and fending for themselves for months while their husbands trapped in the Labrador interior. The Merricks viewed Labradorian settlers, male or female, as exemplary heroes just for living the lives they did (TN 214).

The 25-year-old Merrick experiences this mythical existence, endures great physical hardship on the trail and undergoes an education far different from his days at Yale. He at first aligns himself with a younger, less seasoned trapper, Alvin Blake. When they succeed in poling the river in a place where other experienced trappers were twice swept back, their pride nearly overwhelms them (TN 43). As early as September 26, Merrick observes, "So far the portage is toil and bloody sweat; fine for the cultivation of a bullneck and very bad for the intellect" (TN 57). He realizes with shock that the river has stripped him of his manners and decencies (TN 115). Some of his journal entries seem incongruous coming from a fledgling trapper, as when he describes his home-made pistol holster as "a chef d'oeuvre of the seamstress'

art" (TN 108). At times he feels tired, sick and disillusioned, but his pervasive optimism always wins. After an accident with an axe nearly severs his toe, he sees nature as hostile and menacing. Commenting ironically on his own romanticism, he writes, "My silver urn bubbling over with beauty has jumped off the table and fetched me a crack behind the ear" (TN 124). However, a week later he admits that his own ignorance has caused his mishaps. In *True North* one is never down for long, and never down and out. Merrick's romantic emplotment always prevails, enabling him to view his misfortunes as lessons in life.

He comes to align himself with the intrepid John Michelin, and by December 22, when it is time to return, he has in fact surpassed John in his love of the Labrador interior. John is eager to rejoin his wife and child, but Merrick hates to leave the place which he now considers his true home (TN 208). After the trip, Merrick was to avow that he and Kate had found their true identities: they had lost the masks of civilization and were no longer the same people they had once been. The Merricks reached a new plateau and a new understanding. Their new goal was to live always as they had lived in Labrador (TN 312), and they did manage to achieve this aim for much of their lives. Merrick credited his Labrador experiences with his later success on a Vermont farm:¹⁵

Labrador experiences, living in the country with trappers, taught us self-sufficiency, taught us how little one really needs, and how much one can improvise. . . . Other Americans couldn't do it, but we could. . . . We found it quite easy compared with existence on the trapline. . . . So it's all tied together, and Labrador has been a major factor in my life, and even today at

87 molds my attitudes.¹⁶

Merrick's attitudes even before his arrival in Labrador were shaped by mythical tales of wilderness adventure, contributing to his ruling romantic inner mythos. Romance is interwoven throughout True North's epic journey. Heroic adventures from the pioneer past, ghost stories and native myths give a legendary feel to the actual details of the trip. They swirl around the trappers and show Merrick the story-weaver at his best. His romantic descriptions of the physical landscape form the background of the quest for adventure: "A lovely sunset stained the sky, one of the sad, tugging kind that set one thinking of . . . the snowy glades in the spruces where the rabbits dance on moonlight nights . . ." (TN 11). Merrick intersperses his tale with Innu ghost stories and legends, like the story of the haunted Grand Falls (TN 29) and the myth of the Indians' half-god Man of the Woods, who distributes the fur to men (TN 69). The trappers' superstitions and ghost stories are noted (TN 24-26, 92). Layered into the book are inspiring examples of trappers' stoic hardiness, such as Merrick's depiction of Willie Goudie, supporting himself and his family after he loses his hand to tuberculosis (TN 173-77).

Nature always forms the impassive background for such stories, and Merrick's view of this powerful natural landscape suggests the Romantics. Merrick is "conscious of the mountains, their monstrous weight" and sees them as "gaunt giants" (TN 49). At times he feels as if a force observes him. His November 14 entry evokes images of the young Wordsworth skating in The Prelude:¹⁷ "Tonight it was bright starlight,

and John and I went out for a skate. By the ripple rapid, water has flowed over the snow and made a smooth rink where we circled and swooped by turns. . . . All about us lay the silent forest, frowning at our levity" (TN 121). Merrick quotes Shelley and Sidney Lanier (TN 82, 123), so inspired is he by the beauty of the Labrador wilderness. "Travelling in a track like this is perpetual romance for me . . . ," he dreamily avows as he snowshoes along a Labrador trapline. "And who knows the glens and mysteries we may see way off over the hills, and the old Indian camps with buried heaps of rocks that were fireplaces in caribouskin wigwams long before the days of stoves and rifles" (TN 181).

True North often hearkens back to mythical days of glory in the wilds, equating pioneer Labrador with those glorious times. Merrick also refers repeatedly to his unhappy times in the city and contrasts them with his life in Labrador. Although written as a travel diary, True North is nevertheless a retrospective work. Merrick consulted his notes and compiled his book after the fact. The events seem to head towards a zenith, following a developing linear pattern foreshadowed early on in the work, and the spiritual aspect of the journey receives emphasis because of this pattern. Merrick as traveller is a knowing protagonist, exuding self-confidence about his philosophy of life. From the beginning of True North he prepares the reader for an uplifting experience that will prove the error of urban ways and lead to a certain end-point and goal. The foreword by Thoreau and the title of the first section, "Awakening," signal such a message, as does the title of the second part, "New

Life."

The predictability of the book's eventual outcome does not detract from its interest. The odd power of True North is that, without too much cloying sentimentality, it succeeds in depicting life as exciting, wonderful, and full of possibilities. The "great Unknowable" that surrounds and engulfs the adventurers does not vanquish them. Merrick's didacticism, surrounded as it is by romantic description, jokes and songs, enthralling tales, and interesting information, does not overwhelm the reader. The book contains no overbearing religious zeal. Merrick appears as a pragmatic agnostic, even though his work seems a mythical call to arms. Swept along by the Merricks' happiness and success, the reader witnesses a legendary existence made tangible. The energetic optimism of True North prevails: the mythical has been realized, and heroes have engendered still more heroes.

True North foreshadows Merrick's next Labrador work, Frost and Fire. As the next chapter shows, his mythical romantic plotment carries over into this book. Once again he celebrates trapper heroism, this time in a fictional work which is nevertheless based on actual trapper experiences. Fact and fantasy merge once more in an interesting blend of historical authenticity and melodramatic fiction. The "Merrick myths" blend in with the master stories of Labrador. Merrick's protagonist is yet another stalwart trapper, Jan McKenzie, in the mould of John Michelin, and still another northern heroine like Kate Merrick emerges in the character of Luce Campbell. With the experiences recorded in True North behind him, Elliott Merrick

now seizes the opportunity to let his romanticism flow freely, unshackled by strict adherence to real-life experiences, but nonetheless drawing upon them at his whim.

CHAPTER THREE

FROST AND FIRE: BLENDING FACT AND FICTION

Reality is too subtle for realism to catch it. It cannot be transcribed directly. But by invention, by fabulation, we may open a way toward reality that will come as close to it as human ingenuity may come. . . . Fiction functions as both map and mirror at the same time. Its images are fixed, as the configurations of a map are fixed, and perpetually various, like the features reflected by a mirror, which never gives the same image to the same person.

Robert Scholes, Fabulation and Metafiction (1979).

Fiction and nonfiction, those ostensibly opposing forces, are conventionally seen as distinct modes of discourse. Nonfiction is described as having both discourse and nondiscourse properties, fiction only discourse properties. In fiction, the writer usually indicates that he or she is not the speaker of the text (Adams 7, 16). Yet the "self" of the writer is being projected in some manner, and that writer's own idea of "reality" enters the fictional text. His or her biases may colour events and distort the factual, resulting in a deceptive combination of fact and fantasy that actually brings into question the accepted definition of fiction.

There may be no such thing as "reality," except in the sense of a hypothetical "reality" in the reader's mind. Nonetheless the reader measures events of a narrative against that preconceived notion of the real. A writer's romanticism may offset that hypothetical reality, strongly influencing the text and possibly detracting from its realism. The romantic and the "real" may even engage in a constant battle for dominance of a work. Elliott Merrick's 1939 novel Frost and Fire, a powerful

conflation of realism and fantasy, illustrates just such a struggle. The book juxtaposes dramatic fiction with authentic details of Labrador pioneer life in the 1930s. Merrick describes the adventures of a fictional character, a central Labrador trapper named Jan McKenzie, whose life is followed from the age of twelve up to his manhood. Of central interest is Jan's relationship with Luce Campbell, the settler girl whom he eventually marries. Even as he infuses this love story with romanticism and melodrama, Merrick provides important documentation of the cultures of the settler-trappers and the Innu of central Labrador.

In fact, the reviewers of the novel tended to praise its authenticity over its narration. Rose Feld (New York Herald Tribune Books 16 July 1939) stated that Frost and Fire's "claim to distinction lies less in story than in portrayal of the lives of the men and women who there wage a continual struggle for existence." She added that the book "shows technical weakness as a novel" but "will hold the reader's attention for its description of the north and for the stories of trappers which undoubtedly are rooted in fact." John Patton, in the New York Herald Tribune of 17 July 1939, praised the author's descriptions of the beautiful North and his lively and natural portrayal of the people there. Raymond Holden of The Saturday Review of Literature (22 July 1939) criticized Merrick for giving too much emphasis to place and not enough to character and personality. However, he also saw Frost and Fire as having "great merit" and as "clear evidence of [Merrick's] love for and understanding of the short-summered Labrador coast and its seasonless people."

A familiarity with Merrick's other Labrador books will strongly influence the reading of Frost and Fire. For the reader already acquainted with True North, an echoing realism suffuses this novel. In many ways it seems like a highly fictionalized and dramatized version of that book, with its continuation of Merrick's idealization of the trapper culture. Frost and Fire is set in the same area of Labrador, but with fictional place names. There is the same description of settler customs and a mixture of invented and actual family names of the area. Once again Merrick develops the same meta-narratives, with particular emphasis on tension between the trapper narrative and that of the fur empire.

The hero, Jan McKenzie, bears some resemblances to the young Elliott Merrick in True North, with his anti-urban commentary and such philosophical remarks as these, made in the midst of the Labrador interior: "A feeling rather than a thought came to him that some day in this great wilderness where he had always lived, he would die and be part of the endless forest's hush, neither regretting nor loving. His hope and pain and laughter--they, not the wilderness, would change, quenched as though in the depths of a great ocean. Perhaps happily, perhaps not, who could say?" (FF 177-78). Jan is also reminiscent of the trapper guide John Michelin in his endurance and hardihood. He exemplifies the trappers and their code of being "all brothers in the river" (FF 183), albeit with some exceptions and conflicts for the sake of the story. Jan's confrontation with the dangers of the wilds reminds the reader of the difficulties faced by the Merricks on their trek up Grand River, except that

Jan's escapes from death seem to be much more numerous and dramatic.

The heroine Luce Campbell reflects Merrick's re-invention of the Labrador frontierswoman with her versatility and strength. She also strongly resembles Kate Merrick in True North in her physical endurance and her willingness to enter the trapper world. Luce also accompanies her husband into the Labrador interior just as Kate Merrick did. However, Luce has her baby with her, with resultant additional danger and suspense (FF 297-98). At one point in the novel, Luce and Jan play a game of talking to each other using only Innu words (FF 303-04), just as the Merricks did in True North (TN 298). Luce also aspires to be a nurse before her marriage to Jan.

The Innu man Mathieu in True North (TN 100-01) may have been the suggestion for the Innu Mathieu in Frost and Fire. After the Innu family's requests for food in True North, Elliott Merrick no longer views them as quaint. The tale is romanticized and expanded in Chapter 23 of Frost and Fire, with Jan pursuing the Innu family after they take his food. This chapter, adapted and published separately as the story "Without Words," takes some of its inspiration from real-life occurrences of which Merrick had heard.¹ As in True North, Merrick describes the Innu in terms of the pervading values of their culture, so different from that of the settlers, who saw their food as their property, not as something for the taking.

Such a strong connection with True North gives an added interest and authenticity to Frost and Fire. On the other hand, this connection also serves to

emphasize the melodramatic aspects of Jan's adventures and in this respect actually detracts from the realism of the work. What was reported as fact in True North seems exaggerated in Frost and Fire, where nature seems much harsher and Jan's survival of the dangers of the wilderness a bit too miraculous.

Merrick continues to draw extensively on real-life occurrences mentioned in his other Labrador works. Frost and Fire's resemblances to Merrick's later work, Northern Nurse, also influence its realism. Nurse Eileen Kenyon arrives at the mission hospital at Turner's Harbor (FF 91) just as Kate Merrick arrived at North West River. Eileen was looking "for faraway jobs entirely free of stuffiness" (FF 91) and Kate Austen for somewhere "real" (NN 6). Like Kate, Eileen was allowed to go ashore in the lifeboat in some of the harbours on the way up the Labrador coast (FF 93). She too proves to be a dedicated and capable nurse with the Grenfell mission, and she promotes the usual master story of the International Grenfell Association as does Kate in Northern Nurse. The fictional Eileen also shows the same respect for the Labrador people that Kate demonstrates.

Other people mentioned in Northern Nurse reflect the fictionalized characters of Frost and Fire. The story of a settler child named Maud, who was badly burned and had to be taken to the hospital in Turner's Harbor (FF 213), reminds the reader of the child Ethel, who was also badly burned and whom Kate Austen nursed back to health (NN 295). The real-life description of Malcolm McLean of Kenimish--"twenty-two children, a white beard, looks like somebody out of the Bible, eighty-three years

old and still going strong" (NN 105)--corresponds to that of old Roy McNab of Crooked River, with his twenty-two children: ". . . he had bred himself a whole settlement at the mouth of Crooked River, and now he was living to rule it" (FF 118).

The reader's experience and background knowledge of Labrador make a huge difference to reader reception of this novel. A 1939 American audience with little knowledge about Labrador might have judged the book as escapist literature interspersed with interesting information about northern lifestyles. Central Labrador settlers reading it in 1939 might have considered it engrossing because of its references to well-known places and people. The book still holds an intense interest for central Labradorians today, not just because of its familiar allusions but because of its strange blend of fact and fiction.

Elliott Merrick's unusual conflation was meant to transmit the "essence" of a time. In Frost and Fire he employs a powerful kind of discourse based in large part on actual historical and geographical details. He admits to using actual settlers and places in the Hamilton Inlet area as models for his "invented" characters and places in the novel. The Labradorian reader readily recognizes some of the places described in the book: Eskimo Bay is Hamilton Inlet, the Ragged Mountains are the Mealy Mountains around Lake Melville, Flipper River is Mulligan, Carcajou is Rigolet, Turner's Harbor is North West River. Distributed amongst these fictional names are actual place names such as Peter's Point and Upper Islands. Similarly, the names of

some of the fictional characters, such as Campbell and Goudie, are common ones in the Hamilton Inlet area.

Merrick also bears witness to many of the settler customs, pastimes, and speech patterns as he continues his re-invention of the trapper master stories. The reader old enough to remember the days of dogteams in Hamilton Inlet immediately realizes that Merrick knows the actual Inuit dogteam commands commonly used in the region (FF 168, 216, 270, 273). Merrick also faithfully reports the traditional ways of the settler-trappers, such as the unwritten rule some kept of not travelling on Sundays (FF 26, 133). He mentions and often tells about the seasonal chores of the people, such as cleaning sealskins (FF 112), making boots for dogs travelling on rough ice (FF 86), making toboggans (FF 161-62), sewing moccasins (FF 197), knitting trout nets (FF 259), as well as all the various jobs of a trapper (FF 171). Merrick often captures the characteristic dialect of central Labrador in such expressions as "you can hammer me for a spell" (FF 256), translated as "you can hit me for a while." Common expressions such as the emphatic "me" at the end of a sentence and the referral to females with the endearment "girl" are scattered throughout the conversations of Merrick's characters.

Merrick's interest in and keen observation of the people of Hamilton Inlet led him to incorporate some of their life stories in his novel. Luce Campbell's trip to America to become a nurse does not simply serve as a vehicle for anti-urban comments. The reader from the North West River area quickly sees this as a story

modelled to some extent on that of Millicent Blake Loder, a girl from Rigolet who went to the United States and trained to become a nurse. In fact, unlike Luce, she succeeded and returned to Labrador to nurse with the Grenfell mission.² Merrick had also heard Mina Paddon, wife of the doctor in North West River, tell of the terrible homesickness of people who left Labrador to obtain an education.³ The central Labradorian also recognizes Roy McNab to be modelled after Malcolm McLean. Jan and Luce's idea of setting up their own trading company sounds much like that of Harry and Peggy Paddon, who set up their own little trading post at Salt Water Pond near North West River (H. Paddon 292).⁴

The reader knowledgeable about the settlers of central Labrador must also admire Merrick's eye for detail. His depiction of old Keziah, Jan's Inuit mother, saying her grace at the table (FF 46), evokes the practice of saying exactly the same blessing at many pioneers' tables before each meal. His descriptions of how some of the original frontiersmen came to Labrador from Scotland as servants with the trading company (FF 21) are accurate reflections of how many of the first settlers arrived in Labrador. The Protestant work ethic of these frontiersmen is also clearly depicted (FF 22). Authentic interactions between the settlers and the Grenfell mission in North West River are illustrated, such as Mrs. Nicholet's knitting up ten pounds of yarn in return for the nurse sending her down a case of condensed milk for her children (FF 100). Merrick gives other information about the diet of the settlers (FF 109, 212-13). The trappers' fall leave-taking from North West River to head up to their trapping

grounds in the interior is accurately detailed, down to the roar of the shotguns from the riverbank to bid them farewell (FF 122). Merrick even captures some of the understated, sarcastic humour characteristic of the trappers' exchanges (FF 164-65).

Frost and Fire thus affords a great deal of additional interest for a certain interpretive community of readers. Strangely, however, it can also result in what may be construed as jarring inconsistencies. The reader from Hamilton Inlet is likely to apply a much closer scrutiny to the text in a search for names and stories that are based in fact. He or she may begin to play a kind of guessing game with the text so that the actual story may become secondary, simply an overlay to thinly disguised historical fact. It is when Merrick departs from fact and begins to engage in romanticism and fantasy that there occurs a series of gaps or breaks in the text.

Merrick's mixture of realism and romanticism may result in confusion. When one realizes that the Peter's Point mentioned in the novel lies in a completely different location (up Caribou River) from the real place, located on an island near Rigolet, such confusion may occur. This is accentuated by the fact that some descriptions of actual places, like North West River, are accurate. Only the names are disguised. The mix of dialects used by Merrick is also inconsistent. Sometimes he portrays the central Labrador dialect accurately; at other times he seems to employ a mixture of Labradorian, Newfoundland, and American speech mannerisms. Words like "'tain't" and expressions like "I expect" and "Shall I take her?" (FF 214-15) sound foreign to the ear of the native central Labradorian. And Luce's and Jan's decision to take their

baby on their trip to Jan's traplines in the interior would be considered bizarre and dangerous by some. Although this was a common custom among the Innu, it is a huge break with the practice of the settler audience. It is disconcerting to be confronted with these aberrations in the midst of what the Labradorian may see as valuable documentary.

The reader may tend to overlook the idea that this book is meant to be a fictional work. Fiction has somehow taken on nondiscourse properties for a particular audience, so that the exaggerated adventures and fictionalized characters and events of the novel might seem almost offensive, practically a slur against the Labradorian's pride of place and ancestry. Once again Merrick fuels his writing from the master stories of the North and embellishes them according to his own inner mythos. With Frost and Fire, Merrick's powerful and evocative realism actually conjures up a place and its inhabitants at the expense of story.

However, Merrick's romanticism tends to diminish the authenticity set up by his realism. A good part of Frost and Fire is devoted to the melodramatic love story of Jan McKenzie and Luce Campbell. Luce, Jan's childhood friend, grows to "a slender bronzed girl of nineteen with blue-black hair and laughing eyes" (FF 102). When she decides to go to the States to pursue a nursing career, the author's strong anti-urban bias and romantic ideas about the North are emphasized. Luce meets an American couple, the Carstairs, who are yachting around Labrador. There is an obvious contrast between Luce and the patronizing Mrs. Carstairs, with her "sharp

little chin almost lost in fat" (FF 195). Jan, observing with dismay the growing friendship between Luce and this couple, serves as the mouthpiece for Merrick's philosophy. To Jan, "it seemed too bad that all the people on such a fine vessel as this were not fine people too" (FF 195). When Luce returns disillusioned with the cold materialism of the city, heavy-handed anti-urbanism abounds. Luce is shocked at the loneliness and lack of freedom of city people and longs to get back to "the terrible beauty of her own land" (FF 217).

The author's treatment of Jan's and Luce's relationship seems dated. Jan tries to possess and control Luce and eventually succeeds in keeping her where she belongs--in Labrador with him. The love scenes between them stop short of sex, probably to spare the sensibilities of contemporary readers, not to mention those of Merrick's editor, Maxwell Perkins.⁵ Luce is Merrick's romanticized version of the Labrador settler woman, strong and independent and courageous in some ways, yet "sugar and velvet and silk and love she wanted" (FF 299). Jan is the typical manly Labradorian pioneer, strong yet loving towards the partner whom he considers "as delicious an armful as ever grew" (FF 107).

In contrast to these vital and hardy Labrador settlers are the managers of the Northern Trading Company, symbolic of the fur empire in Labrador. Throughout the novel Merrick emphasizes the callousness and despicability of Neddick and Milo, with resultant overemotional conflicts. Here again, fact and fantasy make for an uneasy combination. The central Labradorian reader recognizes the references to the

Hudson's Bay Company, but the exaggerated cruelty of Neddick and Milo seems far-fetched. Merrick employs these characters to further mythologize the honest pioneers who must deal with them and to promote his idealistic vision of the simple life in the wilderness.

Merrick's novel is certainly not unusual in its portrayal of simple cultures struggling to survive the dangers of nature. Its blend of realism and romanticism is also not unique, nor is its depiction of a melodramatic love story with a reliance on the element of separation. Merrick was not alone in his desire to immerse himself in a foreign culture or in his re-invention of the meta-narratives of that culture. Nor was he atypical in his employment of fiction to transmit moral messages and to condemn the urban way of life. Louis Hémon's Marie-Chapdelaine (1914) and Pierre Loti's Iceland Fisherman (1886) bear striking similarities in style and in subject matter to Frost and Fire.

Marie-Chapdelaine describes pioneer life in Quebec, where the peasant farmers battle nature to cultivate the land and where hard physical labour is a fact of existence. A boy becomes a man at fourteen, as do the settler boys of Labrador. Like the settlers, the Québécois see life as "a simple and a straightforward thing . . . severe but inevitable toil, a good understanding between man and wife, obedience alike to the laws of nature and of the Church" (Hémon 145). Hémon romanticizes these people and their land. In answer to Maria's question "Why should I linger here?" comes a two-page testimonial to the patriotism of the Québécois, to "the voice

of Quebec--now the song of a woman, now the exhortation of a priest. . . . In this land of Quebec naught shall die and naught shall suffer change . . ." (281, 283).

Hémon intersperses his story with informative passages about the Québécois' way of life, with descriptions of their daily and seasonal chores, their customs and pastimes. The heroine's mother seems to voice the opinion of the author: "There is no better life than the life of a farmer who has good health and owes no debts" (194).

Hémon's admiring portrayal of the Québécois farming family suggests the tone of Elliott Merrick's picture of the Labrador settler-trapper and his family. Both authors focus upon dramatic love stories set against a harsh northern background. Both give authentic and realistic details of the lives of their subjects while at the same time introducing certain moral messages and a certain philosophy of existence. Hémon went to Quebec from his native France because he wanted to see and study this new country; he worked as an apple picker on a farm in Péribonka, the region in which Maria Chapdelaine is set (de Montigny 26-27). Touched by the simplicity and hardihood of the French Canadian farmers, he produced a book which glorifies and mythologizes the Québécois. Like Merrick, Hémon re-invented the master stories of the people who so impressed him.

Hémon, too, introduces conflict between rural and urban ways of life. The female protagonist, Maria Chapdelaine, is wooed by a city-dweller, Lorenzo Surprenant, and must decide whether to marry him or become a farmer's wife. In the background of all the events of the novel hovers nature, ever threatening to encroach

upon the cultivated lands of the Quebec farmer. Surprenant calls Quebec "a pitiless ungentle land," and Maria is well aware of "the menace lurking just outside the door" (199). The harsh wilderness has already robbed her of the man whom she really wanted to marry, the young and handsome Francois Paradis, who is lost in a winter storm. The dangers of the forest are offset by Hémon's romantic descriptions of its "unearthly loveliness" (128). In the end Maria makes her decision to remain and to marry the farmer, Eutrope Gagnon. Like Luce Campbell in Frost and Fire, she finds the pull of the land and of her ancestry too strong to deny.

Pierre Loti's Iceland Fisherman likewise tells a love story set against the backdrop of nature, this time the ocean. The hero is a young and robust Breton fisherman named Yann Gaos. The girl who falls in love with him and eventually marries him is Gaud Mével, an attractive, fair-haired girl with "brave, clear eyes" (Loti 21). Yann leaves Brittany for months at a time to fish off the coastline of Iceland. Nature and the sea exert a powerful hold on him; he and his brotherhood of fishermen see that ". . . in life, everything is more or less dependent on the unforeseen chances of the sea, more or less subject to the changes of the weather and to the mysterious migrations of fish . . ." (34). Loti gives romantic descriptions of the ocean with its "gleaming mirror designs of a blue-green . . . prolonged in trails, spreading out like fans . . ." (50). However, these romantic details combine with a constant awareness of an oppressive and strange deadly power, "Mother Nature, blind and heartless" (90). Tragedy looms along the Breton coast, many families losing sons

and fathers to the sea.

Like Merrick and Hémon, Loti sets his love story against realistic particulars of the lives of simple people who must struggle with nature to subsist. Loti's style is much like that of the other two authors: there is the same "mixture of the real and the realistic, the personal and the artificial, truth and illusion" (Lerner 41). He also includes anti-urban remarks: when Gaud leaves city life to return to the coast of Brittany, she turns her back on "the over-civilized people of the towns" (Loti 44). Loti knew and admired Brittany and its traditions, and he made extensive use of real-life details. He made several attempts in 1884 to persuade the daughter of a Breton fisherman to marry him (Wake 117); he probably drew upon his own story of unrequited love to tell of Gaud's heartache at Yann's seeming indifference to her.

A great part of the realistic tone of Loti's novel can be attributed to his style of using apparently simple sentences in language easily understood, also a practice of both Merrick and Hémon. Loti occasionally contrasts his simple language with exotic words "to achieve a greater impressionistic effect of strangeness" and employs "questions, exclamations, short sentences, and indirect free speech or interior monologue to give prose the fluent realism of dialogue" (Lerner 42). Merrick's dynamic style sees him enlivening his narration with Innu or Inuit words or the special terms used by trappers. Hémon gives snatches of common Québécois hymns, songs and prayers to add to the realism of his novel.

The unfortunate heroines, Loti's Gaud and Hémon's Maria, are much more

passive than Merrick's Luce Campbell. Gaud and Maria do not try to enter what is traditionally a man's world. Luce's entry into the trapper's world is not such a departure from fact, since many Labrador settler women trapped and had to do men's jobs.⁶ Luce seems to be more like prototypical Canadian heroines, who "generally exhibit stronger personalities, a greater degree of individuality, and more autonomy of action than might conventionally be considered appropriate" (McGregor 138). Gaud and Maria must accept a cruel fate and continue with life as best they can. They seem to have very little autonomy in comparison with Luce. The portrayal of each woman's life may be realistic for its time and place, although there is no doubt that each author's heroine is a romanticized female, just as each author's novel is a romanticization of a place, a people, and a time.

In his mixing of fact and fabulation, Merrick takes a more optimistic view of life than that of Hémon or Loti. In Frost and Fire, Jan and Luce eventually live happily together, whereas death and tragedy intervene to separate the lovers forever in Maria Chapdelaine and Iceland Fisherman. Nature is a threatening force in Merrick's work, but does not succeed in vanquishing the hero as in the other two novels. After all, Merrick and his wife had successfully made it through the pitfalls of the Labrador wilderness, as described in True North. Why should Jan and Luce not survive also?

Merrick as a writer never thought much about his reader's idea of what was believable or realistic in a story. In fact he rarely considered the reader's point of view when he wrote his stories, except to try to provide the details needed in order

for that reader to understand what was happening in the book. His primary concern was the story, not its audience. As he states,

I write to make a good story, in my estimation, and the reader can like it or not. An author needs to be courageous and independent-minded, writing for himself, for itself, the story. He remembers that he is first and foremost a storyteller--the old art, around campfires, in oral times, before books. . . . He deals (if he is any good) in affairs of the human heart. . . . He sees it happening before his eyes, and tries to put it down so that other people will see it too--as though he were making a painting.

Merrick was fascinated by the lives of the Labrador pioneers and wanted "other people to know of these wonderful people and their inspiring (to urban unfortunates) lives."⁷

This attitude of privileging the text over its reader must affect the tone and style of a work. It is evident that Merrick wrote Frost and Fire for a much broader audience than a small core of Labrador enthusiasts. He did not consider the text's possible confusing aspects for the reader familiar with Hamilton Inlet but instead concentrated upon emphasizing and developing the "Merrick meta-narratives" of the North. His authorial intention was to produce his own version of Labrador life, what he considered its essential aspects of simplicity, fortitude, and determination. Curiously, this entailed a radical departure from historical or geographical fact in some instances and faithful reliance on it in others. The author thus presents his own selective picture of "reality." All can be sacrificed to the telling of the tale. Where Merrick decided that actual details did not sound interesting or compelling enough, he invented and romanticized to create a better story, from his point of view.

Once again Merrick's message is clear: the "real" life is to be found in the northern wilderness. In Frost and Fire he more overtly weaves his romantic philosophy into northern events; his hero-worship of the trappers and his anti-urbanism project themselves more dramatically than in True North. His dreams and biases are more openly explored in the realm of fiction, where his ideas are given free reign.

For Merrick, writing was the power to present the world as he interpreted it through his observations, dreams, and inner myths. Such an authorial attitude may mean a much stronger projection of the author's "self," his true beliefs and personality. In fact, Frost and Fire is rife with typical Merrick viewpoints and opinions. Although Merrick writes that the reader may think what he wishes, there is no doubt that he did want to influence his audience in some way. Elliott Merrick's conception of "truth" is geared to his forceful philosophy of life and to what he considers story appeal. Distinct moral messages that constitute that idea of truth are often transmitted, with urban life constantly denigrated and materialism denounced. Merrick's romantic ideology lies firmly behind the narration of this novel, as with his other Labrador works.

Merrick does intend the reader to be inspired by tales of the Labrador people. His persuasive blend of romanticism and realism could indeed be powerful, but despite this, he seemed not to write with any overt purpose in mind. A reviewer of "Without Words" once told Merrick that his popular story was "a perfect example of

the traditional formula for a best-selling short story," what with its suspense, exotic milieu, dilemma, dénouement, and happy surprise ending. Merrick was aghast at this and responded, "This is all news to me."⁸

Yet the success of "Without Words" as well as the interest generated in Frost and Fire confirm the appeal of Merrick's particular re-invention of the North.

"Without Words" has been reprinted more than fifty times, translated into Danish, and appears in at least six American highschool textbooks and two or three Canadian ones. Arthur Rank Productions was at one time interested in adapting Frost and Fire to the cinema. They hired a scenario writer to whom Merrick refers as "a city product who wouldn't know bow from stern, and messed it all up." Merrick himself thought his novel "would make a glorious movie, with the appeal of a wildlife or geographical documentary plus a tight plot growing out of character and milieu, as for instance Crocodile Dundee." He would change the novel around, though, so that Luce becomes the central figure rather than Jan: "Having given it a good try and learned a lot, she renounces Boston, and goes back to her own bitter land, where she is proud to make a better wife of Jan because of her experiences."⁹

Merrick remains confident that he understands what constitutes a good story. He was always willing to alter mundane facts for the storyteller's art, but he also believed in the importance of immersing himself in the milieu of which he wrote. He asserts, "I have tried always to be genuine and true in all my stories, often suffering all the trials and tribulations of my characters, my frontier, rugged characters, as well

as the tribulations of an overly-sensitive artist and thin-skinned outsider trying to live their lives. . . ."10 His Frost and Fire calls into question the conventional definition of fiction. As Merrick himself writes, ". . . is it not true that authentic, truly forged fiction, motivated by a passion to impart the essence of a time, an atmosphere, can be more true sometimes than nonfictional accounts? How can you distinguish, how can you draw the line? They merge."<11 This, then, is what Elliott Merrick hoped to achieve: the capturing through art of another kind of "truth"--the essence of pioneer Labrador.

Frost and Fire and True North prepare the reader for Merrick's next Labrador work, Northern Nurse. Here the northland begins to reshape Kate Austen's life as it does the lives of both Merricks in True North. Northern Nurse celebrates Kate Austen as northern heroine and outstanding nurse with the Grenfell mission in Labrador. The next chapter further illustrates Elliott Merrick's habitual imposition of his biases and his mythical ideals, this time on what purports to be the autobiography of his wife. The settler master stories are celebrated and given the Merrick slant in this book as well. Kate Austen begins to take on the attributes of the Labrador frontierswoman; she, too, wishes to be adopted into the settler culture. The "real" and ideal merge again, Merrick's own beliefs and philosophy demanding anew to be heard, often dominating the text and overshadowing the "voice" of his wife.

CHAPTER FOUR

NORTHERN NURSE: AN UNCANNY MERGING

This view of . . . their lives as heroic seems to be a male literary tradition. The proclivity of men toward embellishing their autobiographies results in the projection of a self-image of confidence, no matter what difficulties they may have encountered. This is contrary to the self-image projected in women's autobiographies. What their life stories reveal is a self-consciousness and a need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding. The autobiographical intention is often powered by the motive to convince readers of their self-worth, to clarify, to affirm, and to authenticate their self-image. Thus, the idealization and aggrandizement found in male autobiographies is not typical of the female mode.

Estelle C. Jelinek, Women's Autobiography (1980).

Several years after his departure from Labrador, Elliott Merrick decided that his wife's adventures there ought to be chronicled. Kate Austen had nursed in Indian Harbour and North West River in 1929 and 1930, sharing her husband's love of the land and its people as she worked with the Grenfell Mission. The Merricks resolved to collaborate on the book that came to be called Northern Nurse (1942). This book is remarkable not just for its medical case stories and tales about the North. In it Merrick took the unusual step of adopting his wife's voice and persona and writing from her point of view. As a result, Northern Nurse presents an uncanny blend of two voices, of two heroic dreams of the North merged into one.

This unusual merging resulted in a book markedly different from other women's autobiographies. Whereas women's life stories reflect a sense of alienation from the male world, a sense of being *other* (Jelinek, Tradition 187), Northern Nurse

transmits no such sense of difference. As is common in men's autobiographies in general and Merrick's Labrador works in particular, this book presents a life as if it were a "mythic tale," an heroic example. The narrative tone of Kate Austen as portrayed here is one of great self-confidence, most unusual for a woman's autobiography. Her story follows a linear, chronological progression, also uncommon in women's life stories, which so often mirror through disjunctive narrative the fragmented, multidimensional quality of women's lives (Jelinek, Tradition 188). In essence, Northern Nurse reflects its real author as much as it does Kate Austen. It reveals Elliott Merrick's dreams and ideals even as it purports to be a woman's life story. Northern Nurse's male author projects women's autobiography squarely and atypically into the heroic tradition.

Odd combination though it was, Merrick's Northern Nurse did enjoy great popularity. It remained on the New York Times' bestseller list for seventeen weeks and narrowly missed becoming a Reader's Digest book-of-the-month. Its favourable reviews illustrated differing opinions on its authorship. Katherine Woods of the New York Times (22 March 1942) deemed Northern Nurse "more than the ordinary collaboration." She allowed that "Mr. Merrick keeps himself out of the picture until the very end," but that his knowledge of the land served to "deepen and strengthen the narrative." Rose Feld reviewed the book for the 29 March 1942 edition of New York Herald Tribune Books. She saw it as Kate Austen's work: "But more than telling stories that bring a chuckle or the tingle of excitement, she succeeds admirably

in portraying the simple, hard life of Labrador and the simple, rugged people who prefer it to any other kind. Her enthusiasm for both is infectious, probably the only infection that she has ever carried." H.D. Boylston, in the June 1942 Atlantic Bookshelf, described it as "Elliott Merrick's account of his wife's work as a nurse in Labrador." W. Anthony Paddon's more recent review in the Newfoundland Quarterly (Winter 1984) calls Northern Nurse "a worthy successor" to True North "in which Kay Austen . . . tells of her years of nursing in Labrador." But Paddon also commends Merrick for his "fine job of writing and editing to make this a moving and unforgettable book."

Northern Nurse's popularity added up to little in the way of sales because of the paper shortage during the war, and Scribner's also ran out of copies at the crucial Christmas buying time.¹ However, it was later reprinted twice by Sherrie Urie, and the Countryman Press in Vermont will soon be reprinting it in paperback. This renewed interest may reflect readers' continuing preoccupation with the lives of women in the North, as well as an increasing literary focus on the genres of biography and autobiography. There is also a growing concern with the topic of voice appropriation. Because Elliott Merrick chose to relate Kate Austen's story, his book raises controversy, leaving the modern reader questioning his narration. Did Elliott Merrick "re-invent" his wife's life as a nurse in Labrador, or did he in fact do little to alter his wife's oral description of events (in spite of his great temptation to write a more appealing story)? Some might think Merrick's foreword to Northern Nurse

ambiguous:

This is the story of my wife when she was Nurse Kate Austen. She has told me many of the tales given here; others I saw for myself during the years we worked in the same Labrador settlements. Planning this book together, we have tried to give a true picture of one nurse's work, thought and adventure.

Is Northern Nurse yet another expression of Elliott Merrick's dreams of heroism in the North, or does it indeed reflect his wife's own dreams, her own personal mythology?

Merrick describes Northern Nurse as "a very close collaboration, Kay giving the bare bones or more, and I improving, re-arranging, weaving in background for the stranger-reader, and providing continuity and sometimes a chapter-end twist for reader satisfaction."² It was he who decided that Kate's experiences should be committed to paper after hearing her give talks at various clubs in the United States. Kate urged her husband not to attend these functions lest he embarrass her. However, he had heard women praising Kate's charm and appeal as a speaker and one day could not resist sneaking into the dark back row of the College Women's Club in Burlington, Vermont. Struck by the human interest material of her lectures, Merrick suggested they compile a book together. Kate decided that he should write it, after which she would assess it and perhaps remember more. Merrick avows that she should have been the author--"except she had no interest in polishing or organizing material," and they felt it would be best for Merrick, an aspiring writer trying to make his name, to sign it. He asserts that "in this book our abilities were merged,

welded, shared, transformed."

Many problems underlie such a collaborative work, not the least of which is classification as either biography or autobiography. G. Thomas Couser describes collaborative autobiography as "a kind of literary mercy-killing--the taking of one person's life, by mutual agreement and prearrangement, by another. With literary as with literal euthanasia, however, the quality of mercy is sometimes strained: it is not always clear whose interests the act serves" (201). The Merricks also left Labrador in 1931, so Northern Nurse was written long after the events it describes. Do distortions of memory enter the picture? This book may indeed be the result of deep mutual understanding and empathy between a man and his wife, but then again, a husband may take liberties with his wife's story that another would not. Kate also told her stories orally, and it was up to Merrick to translate her spoken words to the printed page. When a story is filtered through someone else's pen, alterations may occur, and that author's biases may intrude.

Merrick's own private mythologies do seem to prevail in Northern Nurse, as in True North and Frost and Fire, even though his wife also shared many of his ideals. Both were keen adventurers, Kate having left Australia as a young nurse to head for Europe and then for Labrador. Merrick's sentiments seem to echo in her desire to leave the rich, too-civilized, soft life of Paris to go somewhere "real" (NN 6). His own master-themes and dreams filter through the tales of his wife's adventures on the way to Labrador, as well as in Indian Harbour and North West

River. The description of her trip across the Atlantic, rife with nautical terms and details, shows Merrick's particular fascination with the sea. Kate's philosophical comment about the ocean's fury seems familiar to readers of Merrick's other works: "Why should I fret or rage or smile or weep when it was being done on such a gigantic scale all around me? On my few hours off duty I would just live, just be" (NN 34).

Kate is portrayed as following a dream, just as her husband did when he travelled to Labrador: a dream of adventure in the wilds, of escape from a meaningless urban existence. Merrick paints a picture of an adventurous heroine and a lover of nature who is also a devoted International Grenfell Association nurse. Kate shares Merrick's admiration for the Labrador people and promotes his re-invented settler meta-narrative. When the overcivilized Hudson's Bay Company manager at North West River expresses terror that his daughter may fall in love with a "native," Kate replies, "She couldn't do better" (NN 119). Her love of Labrador's wild nature reveals itself in Merrick's usual romantic descriptions of the North: "It seemed to me I had never enjoyed my life so much, never found it so sweet and vital. I was always conscious of the wonder of the world outside, the raging drift, the constant change, the mountains shining in the sun, the savage cold at night, the northern lights stealing above the bay and bursting into all the colors of the rainbow" (NN 212). Were Kate and Elliott so similar in philosophies? Did she invent her own mythology of the North? Is Northern Nurse a combination of two versions of the "real" North, or are

we as readers being once more enveloped in Elliott Merrick's "notion of the real"?

Merrick's love of anecdote certainly provides the framework for Northern Nurse. He often hearkens back to tales told in his other books, True North and Frost and Fire. Unlike Frost and Fire, Northern Nurse concerns itself mostly with real people and events without much camouflaging on Merrick's part. As this thesis has earlier pointed out, Malcolm McLean (flimsily disguised as Roy McNab in Frost and Fire) appears as himself here in Merrick's detailed portrayal of McLean's life at Kenemish with his large family (NN 105, 278-82). The trapper Robert Michelin of True North materializes once more when Kate Austen saves his children from dysentery (NN 201-05). Merrick's love of the story permeates the book: Dr. Harry Paddon's tales, Donald MacMillan's jokes about the Inuit, anecdotes from Mrs. Mina Paddon, stories about Sir Wilfred Grenfell, as well as Kate's own medical exploits, run throughout the text of Northern Nurse.

The stamp of Elliott Merrick's style and personality is placed on this book as much as his other Labrador works. Merrick's philosophy of life, so strongly expressed in True North, asserts itself once more through Kate: "In danger I lose my stale self and find a new one" (NN 18). "It was dogs like these that took Peary to the North Pole and Amundsen to the South," Merrick remarks of the dogteam taking Kate up Grand River (NN 126), giving his usual nod to heroes of the past. He also inserts his own anti-urban opinions in his detailing of Labrador life, including the morals of the people of Hamilton Inlet: "It would be unjust to give the idea that Hamilton Inlet

morals are lax. On the contrary, there is less promiscuity than in urban centers" (NN 257).

Although Northern Nurse is suffused with Merrick's distinctive style, it must be recalled that he intended to craft this book as if it were his wife telling the tales. At times he needs to remind the reader (and perhaps himself) of this fact, as when Kate tells of breaking a trail for the lead dog of the hospital team: "Daisy was following me well, and I wondered if our common femaleness was any bond between us; a silly thought, but you have to think of something as you walk along" (NN 216-17). Merrick, after all, had a very different way of telling a story from his wife:

. . . she had no interest in messing about with two and three drafts, with including details necessary for reader orientation or understanding, with chronology; with the reintroduction of characters who become familiar; with making each chapter a little human interest tale; with what was best to include or exclude. She wished to tell it once, spontaneously, and forget it. I can hardly explain. But, just as it is my nature to recast, to polish, to rearrange a story to make it as dramatic or interesting or comprehensible to a reader as possible, it was her nature to live actively and cheerily and do no such thing. She would tell a story as she remembered--and go on, no looking back. I put in a great many details, having seen her at work as a nurse, and having . . . lived there. . . .³

Given these contrasting attitudes to story-telling, how then does Merrick's Northern Nurse differ from how Kate herself might have written it? Elliott Merrick always took great pride in his wife's achievements, and he confesses, "Much of the book's success was her strength, ability, humor, love, humility, pride, courage, experience, perception, sensitivity. . . . She was a woman in a million, and it shone through thanks to me."⁴ Perhaps Kate Austen was actually as self-confident as she

appears in Northern Nurse. "For me it was strange to be uncertain, not to be hot on some new job, some new place, some new exciting life," she admits late in the book, after she shows a rare instance of self-doubt (NN 240). Kate takes charge and always seems self-assured, even in the most difficult and life-threatening cases.

Much of her air of confidence comes from Merrick's robust masculine rhetoric, hardly the ambivalent tone of many women's autobiographies (Smith 176). Such sentences as "She weighed about 98 pounds, I'd say, and could probably have licked her weight in wildcats" (NN 20) strike the reader as assertive, abrupt and male-oriented. Some refer incongruously to male authors, as when Kate tells of her experience in a small boat at night: "It made me think of Conrad's Youth and the young ship's officer who woke in a lifeboat and saw strange Asiatic faces above him on the dock" (NN 18). Later, the sight of the steamer Kyle reminds her of Kipling's "Oh, the liner, she's a lady" (NN 53).

Women's autobiographies are often characterized by insertions of diary or journal notes, by random memories of the past, episodes and fragments, a focus on others, and a nonprogressive narrative (Jelinek, Tradition 188). None of these characteristics applies to Northern Nurse, as Elliott Merrick forcefully injects his own ideas, his own "self," into its narration. From the outset of his collaboration with his wife, Merrick was determined to arrange his stories chronologically. Some stories seemed to him "too medical and matter-of-fact," so he altered them accordingly to appeal more to the lay reader. He also came up with story chapters.⁵ The book

follows a linear progression, but its many anecdotes along the way reflect Merrick's attraction to the "story."

Women usually write about their world of family and friends, their professional lives usually mattering less to them than their personal accomplishments (Jelinek, Tradition 187). However, comparatively little of Northern Nurse is devoted to Kate's life in Australia. Scattered references are made to her family back home, but little is given of her background before she went to Labrador. Merrick concentrates on her life as a Labrador nurse and tends to adhere to that theme, her professional life remaining the focus. He continues to interest as well as instruct with his sensitive and detailed descriptions of Kate's medical adventures, her case studies and many chores with the Grenfell mission. With such asides as "I hereby spare you the tale, gentle reader" (NN 56), he shows a certain delicacy when referring to deliveries and other "women's troubles." Merrick takes pride in Kate's handling of medical cases and shows others praising her abilities. When she helps Dr. Paddon with a difficult case in Indian Harbour, he comments, "You're going to be useful here" (NN 29). The skilled surgeon Dr. Mount lauds her work with "That was some going, Nurse, some going" (NN 292).

Whereas women's autobiographies often project a sense of difference and alienation from the male world, men are regarded with sympathy in Northern Nurse. Kate speaks of male patients' vulnerability and their tendency to fall in love with their nurses: ". . . when you are a nurse you know about men and how they need to love

and be loved" (NN 73). Men are viewed with affection and often with deference, as in the case of eminent and capable doctors, like Dr. Harry Paddon, Sir Wilfred Grenfell, and Dr. Mount: "It was as thrilling as ever to be seeing Dr. Mount again, for a nurse has it positively incorporated into her bloodstream that a brilliant surgeon is God's finest creation" (NN 292).

Women often write "obliquely, elliptically, or humorously in order to camouflage their feelings" (Jelinek, Women's Autobiography 15), but this kind of understatement is not typical of Northern Nurse. Kate seems fully aware of her abilities and matter-of-factly describes her accomplishments. This book, written with mythical master stories of northern pioneer womanhood in mind, adopts forthright heroic tones. Kate Austen seems to be in a process of self-discovery in Northern Nurse and duly expresses her emotions, as when she reveals her jealous desires. "What was I roaming for?" she asks herself. "If only I could get inside of life, not just see it and touch it, but be it. . . . It did not matter that some tied-down mothers envied me and my freedom and my travels. I envied them; that was what mattered" (NN 240).

Northern Nurse celebrates motherhood, but it does not explore the multidimensionality of women's lives. It includes one brief anecdote about Kate's friendship with a Labrador woman, Hannah Montague (NN 151-55), but this appears to be inserted more because of the unusual circumstances (medical and other) surrounding it than for the purpose of discussing a personal relationship. The same

could be said of Kate's friendship with Jeff, a young doctor who develops an affection for her. This story also connects with an incident in which Jeff would have lost his life but for her calm and intelligent nursing care (NN 68-74).

No strong attitude of rebellion runs through Northern Nurse. It is not unconventional and eccentric, as are many women's autobiographies, although it shares their vitality through Merrick's spirited writing. The attitude towards women underlying Northern Nurse is that of Merrick himself: that they can be independent to a certain extent and should be respected as the rightful helpmate of man. Merrick sees women as more intuitive and sensitive than men; he views them as very different and "hate[s] to see women trying to be men." For him, there are certain essential decisions that the man has always had to make. He avows, "Men do not like being bossed by women. It's just so. Women have their sphere and men too. One sex does not have to be superior to the other. They are parallel." He decries "the screaming feminists [who] have become something of a trial in the States nowadays."⁶ He refers to his wife as his "faithful, loyal, helpful partner" who made it possible, through her sacrifices, for him to pursue his writing career.⁷ Merrick summarizes his opinions:

To me it seems that the woman of the past, especially the settler's wife, the pioneer wife and mother, helpmate and well-loved, essential pillar of the team, was often twice as much of a person as her modern counterpart. If she followed her man, it was only because he had to fight for her, doing the breadwinning as best he could, while, ideally, the reason she married him was that she knew and trusted him to love and respect her as she respected and loved him. There was none of the inferiority so often emphasized today.⁸

Merrick makes his attitudes known throughout Northern Nurse, with

motherhood given an important thematic emphasis. Kate attends to many deliveries and expresses her thoughts on child-bearing: "It's tremendous and it's sublime, labor day is. And sometimes it's too big for us, but it has this--it's a peak of days and no woman's life is complete without one" (NN 145). A rare moment of weakness occurs for Kate when she loses a patient, a two-year-old girl: "I suppose it was having her there all to myself, knowing her utter dependence, feeling her curl close to me for warmth, that woke maternal hungers. . . . 'I loved her so,' I sobbed" (NN 209). Her own desire for children surges as the book and her life progress.

Comments about girls, women, and romance are sprinkled throughout Northern Nurse. The teenaged girls of North West River are "so pretty they'd make your heart turn over, for they have the strong sweet beauty of wild flowers . . ." (NN 163). Kate admires a Labrador woman, Mrs. Willie Baikie: "Looking at her lined face, her fine eyes and good jaw, I decided that women are by nature primitive, and that I had never seen a happier one than this" (NN 225). Later she refers to "women's talk, the ageless talk of women everywhere, about babies and births and children. Not very smart maybe, but if it weren't for the subject talked of, there soon wouldn't be any men to think it dull. Gabble, gabble, babble . . ." (NN 226). Pearlie Burns' birthing of an illegitimate child elicits this comment: "It is natural enough for a man to leave an illegitimate or two in his wake. . . . The sad part of it is that it is not natural or satisfactory for a woman to be left with a child and no man" (NN 257). "After all this wide blackness how gratefully they must accept the feminine, the

intimate, the small and pretty and individual," Kate remarks of that special love of the Labrador men for their partners (NN 285). Merrick's own first encounter with Kate is touched on briefly towards the end of Northern Nurse, but little detail is given of their courtship or their wedding. Merrick evinces a sensitivity and delicacy of feeling whenever romance arises in the book, and it is no different here.

Indeed, such sensitivity arises when women write about their personal lives as well. Their autobiographies also reflect concerns about motherhood. However, they tend to dwell more on family life in general, especially as it concerns their own development. They view their lives as incomplete, still in process, with much left to learn. It is as if they are attempting to find some order or sense to inform their existence. Women tend to express uncertainty and to admit to emotional turmoil and conflict. Even when they have achieved much, they tend to dwell on their difficulties and doubts. They do not project a self-image of confidence and heroism, and they rarely sing their own praises, evincing a modesty about their accomplishments.

Rarely do male autobiographers project a sense of modesty or shyness, and Merrick proves no exception. Most of his narration, brimming with his usual self-assurance, shows a marked departure from the tone of most women's autobiographies. When a woman tells her own story, it is usually in a self-effacing way, with misgivings and doubts surfacing in the text. The influence of the male brings quite a different picture, as in H. Gordon Green's biography of Myra Bennett, Don't Have Your Baby In The Dory (1974). Here Green intercedes to praise this nurse's abilities

and diminish the doubts that she reveals in her diary excerpts.

Elliott Merrick's portrayal of Kate Austen bears many similarities to that of Myra Bennett. She also came from overseas to nurse in Newfoundland, and she too proved to be a very capable and dedicated nurse who handled many difficult cases, many of them deliveries. Green, however, does not appropriate her voice, but intersperses his narrative with Myra's own comments, as well as excerpts from her diaries. Myra does not exude the same confidence as Kate: at one point, in a quoted diary excerpt, she confesses, "My mind is very chaotic . . ." (Green 52). Green, though, makes it clear that he greatly admires the subject of his biography; he sees her as a heroine who has dedicated "magnificent years of struggle" to Newfoundlanders (10). He also tends to interject his own mitigating comments following the diary excerpts, such as this: "One can almost see the gleam in the young nurse's eye as she delighted in the feminine prerogative to make the ardent male suffer" (75).

Green's opinions and interests pervade the novel, and he backgrounds his story with much Newfoundland history and folklore, just as Merrick brings in tales of pioneer Labrador. Grenfell receives due mention and admiration in this book, as he does in Northern Nurse. Don't Have Your Baby In The Dory also follows a linear, chronological order to which Myra's diary entries adhere. Green's book touches upon her courtship by a Daniel's Harbour native, but her journal excerpts show the same reticence as Merrick displays about his own budding romance. In fact, Green

comments, "As for the reaction of the community to this whirlwind romance, the diary is exasperatingly silent" (77). So, presumably, was Myra herself. Admiration for the Newfoundlanders echoes throughout, as does admiration for Labradorians in Northern Nurse; however, the Newfoundlanders' ignorance and superstition often interfere with their health. Green unashamedly displays his own feelings and biases as he chronicles this nurse's life.

Daughter of Labrador (1989) is another nurse's story, this time actually written by the woman herself. It deals with the life of Millicent Blake Loder, who received some of her inspiration to become a nurse from Kate Austen. Loder once worked at the North West River hospital with her and greatly admired her.⁹ Millicent Loder's autobiography shows a marked difference in tone, style and content from Northern Nurse. A sense of struggle and of humility underlies this picture of a capable and independent nurse and, unlike Northern Nurse, this autobiography does not focus almost solely on a nursing career. The first chapter is devoted to Loder's home and family and gives detailed descriptions of pioneer life in Labrador. Her pride in her homeland and love of her family vie with her nursing career in this narrative. Its rhetorical style differs markedly from that of Merrick, with its gentler, slower flow of words and its warmer, less vigorous tone, in such sentences as "We were met and warmly welcomed by a jolly, smiling, motherly sort of lady" (Loder 32).

Millicent, like Kate, was determined to pursue a dream: to become a head nurse in a Labrador hospital. She proceeds to recount her experiences in following

that dream--including details of her school days and her nurses' training in the United States. "I thought America must be a beautiful country, if every place was like Madison," she remarks, reflecting an attitude of interest in, rather than condemnation of, urban life (49). Still, Labrador remains first in her heart. She mentions Elliott Merrick sending her True North as a Christmas present; she read it over and over when homesick. Like Kate Austen after moving to the States, Millicent Loder gave a number of speaking engagements about Labrador, in her case to earn extra money during her highschool days in America.

She writes of her own accomplishments in an understated tone, sometimes revealing her conflicting emotions or giving anachronistic asides. She skims over the medical facts of her hospital cases. After the almost inevitable death of a patient with tuberculosis, Loder writes, "I agonized over this. I wondered why I had put myself in this position. How dared I think that I had knowledge enough to be in charge of people's lives!" (89). When telling of her friend Hazel Compton's courtship and marriage, she interjects, "(I ran into Hazel again a little while ago and was pleased to see that she had the same enthusiasm that characterized her work with the Mission. Several of her children were making careers in the medical field.)" (95). She also writes of her grief and loneliness after the deaths of her young daughter and later her husband: "There was no relief for the agony and no end to the tears. . . . Again there were long months of loneliness and difficult adjustments for me" (108).

Loder tends to direct praise and attention towards others and away from

herself. Like Merrick, she expresses admiration for the dedicated workers at the Grenfell Mission, including Jack Watts, so often mentioned in Northern Nurse. Her dream of becoming a head nurse comes true, but ironically she realizes that it is not really what she wants after all. She admits that she actually preferred being a bedside nurse. When she is awarded an honorary degree from Memorial University for her work, her remarks are typically self-effacing: "Many nurses had done the same work as I had, but I was pleased to accept this honour, as I felt it would serve as a tribute to all the nurses that worked with the Grenfell Mission" (121-22).

Perhaps nurses like Millicent Loder actually tended to be more independent and capable than many other women, but Kate Austen appears supremely so. In a recent letter, Merrick praises his wife as "this remarkable woman herself, courageous, forthright, enterprising, competent, hardy, full of humor and *joie de vivre*, loving, compassionate."¹⁰ He gives details of her family life, barely touched on in Northern Nurse: "She had few material advantages in her girlhood, except a loving, close-knit family imbued with the work ethic, an Australian determination to make life good, and no sympathy for crybabies." He goes on to tell how the older ones in her family of twelve children contributed to the fees for educating the younger ones and how Kate had nursed through typhoid and diphtheria epidemics after World War I in Australia.

"She was a woman of action, with no patience for three and four drafts, for revision, for the struggle toward perfection, choice of word, and all the editing that

had become second nature to me," Merrick again asserts. "I often had to supply the connections and the explanations, in accordance with both her nature and the facts, imaging, you may say, but always authentic, true-to-life, true-to-her-character imaginings." He now attests that Northern Nurse contains no fiction or fictionalizing "strictly speaking"; deletions would occur "if I soared off into something that wasn't so." Certainly Merrick saw their collaborative effort as one "of mutual understanding, mutual trust, mutual stimulation, give-and-take, mutual inspiration and recall . . . mutual view of and interest and admiration in and for the Labrador settlers we had known." He writes that Kate "never thought of celebrating herself, but I did." She valued her reputation as a dedicated nurse, not as an author, and had no intention or wish to write another book after Northern Nurse.

"You make a fundamental mistake when you impose the women's lib concerns of the 1980s upon the mores of the 1940s," Merrick warns today's readers. "A story is a story, good or bad, then just as now." The reviews confirm that many people were indeed enthralled by Merrick's story of his wife. His much-admired editor, Maxwell Perkins, said he would not change a line of the text and expressed eager interest in meeting her.¹¹ Ironically, that story of a woman's life written by a man may have inspired many women to the level of independence and self-confidence it so strongly and unusually expressed (for a female). Many women wrote Merrick wanting to know more about Kate. Sheila Fortescue, a discouraged and disillusioned nurse in England after the war years, chanced upon a copy of Merrick's book. She stayed up

all night reading it and thereupon decided to work for the Grenfell Mission. She later became the wife of Dr. W. A. Paddon¹² in North West River.¹³

Northern Nurse retains its charm and appeal today, but the modern reader brings a different perspective to its text. Its fascination lies not only in its narrative appeal, or in its authentic chronicling of pioneer life with the International Grenfell Association, or in its reaffirmation of the Merrick northern mythology. It represents a strange merging of genres and sexes, of dreams and heroic goals. Elliott Merrick's personality and style dominate the book. Like an enthusiastic showman, he reveals his wonderful wife to the world, but at the same time he presents her as a northern heroine embodying his philosophy of life and his objectives. Feminist critics might take issue with Merrick's depiction of her, but if he had not taken charge, it is possible, indeed probable, that nothing of Kate Austen's life would ever have been written. Northern Nurse reflects an unusual collaboration, rather daring by today's standards. Perusal of its pages unearths Kate Austen's comment: "I have a funny streak in me, I expect, of masculinity or something" (NN 199). The reader may be forgiven for viewing this quote with a certain retrospective irony.

This thesis has been preparing that reader for an overall view of Merrick's Labrador works, including a glimpse of his The Long Crossing and Other Labrador Stories (1992). The next chapter further illustrates how Merrick's "real" Labrador was created by mixing historical and geographical fact with romantic hopes and dreams. It will explore on a larger scale the overall implications of Merrick's

particular view of the North as catalyst for the artist and confirmation of his ideology. It will also demonstrate how the imposition of that view on northern events was not meant to disturb the physical landscape or alter the life patterns of its inhabitants. In this respect Merrick differs distinctly from many other visitors to the North. He never meant to leave his mark on the northland but instead wished to preserve and commemorate in his writing what he perceived to be the "true" Labrador.

CHAPTER FIVE

LABRADOR BECKONS

Throughout history, certain types of men, coming into contact with the various zones of the North, have developed very characteristic attitudes. . . . the North is like an irresistible itch, which implacably drives the man to mobility. In certain cases, nothing succeeds in stifling the call of the North. Equally, one finds cases of escape into the North, where distance from the daily, monotonous round serves as nourishment, cure, and even renaissance.

Louis-Edmond Hamelin, Canadian Nordicity (1978).

Many people have ventured into the North seeking new regions to explore or simply escaping urban monotony. Labrador has attracted a number of such adventurers, and Elliott Merrick was obviously one of them. His approach to the North is better appreciated when compared to that of others who travelled into Labrador's interior. Merrick saw his adventure in Labrador as contributing to his personal growth and changing him for the better. While other people, such as Leoridas and Mina Hubbard, were interested in leaving their mark on the territory and on charting Labrador's unknown areas, Merrick wanted the land to leave its mark on him. He had no desire to physically change that land in any way. But through his writing, he altered it according to his northern romantic mythos, at the same time imposing an air of permanence on "his" Labrador and the heroic way of life it engendered. Some explorers, like William Brooks Cabot, wished to know the natives and record their way of life more so than describe or romanticize the terrain, while Merrick viewed the land as prime determinant of human actions. For him, close

knowledge of northern nature produced superior character, and he wanted that northland to mould his as well.

Elliott Merrick wanted "to move people's hearts and make them see how wonderful the world was."¹ His encounter with Labrador brought him to a very different world from Montclair, New Jersey. For him, Labrador became not just a place, but a symbol of renewal and freedom. His brief two-and-a-half-year stay provided such a concentration of impressions and emotions that it directed the rest of his days. He entered not only the physical area of Labrador, but an imaginary landscape which he exhorted his readers to celebrate with him. Against this combination of the mythic and the real, he shaped his stories of the North. Labrador transformed itself into a Utopia under the influence of his artistic imagination.

Labrador, in its remoteness and strangeness, represented a utopian ideal celebrated in American writing, "a strong urge to believe in the rural myth along with an awareness of industrialization as counterforce to the myth" (Marx 229). For Merrick, those simple, static Labradorian societies arrested in time offered clear proof of the inanity of city life. His work celebrates that "American form of romantic pastoralism" (Marx 229) centred on the rebirth of the vision of a new America. Labrador emerges as the new and promised land America once was before industrialization. It forms an intoxicating dream into which Merrick willingly steps. His first Labrador book, True North, presented this dreamland to Americans in the midst of the Great Depression. He told his readers, ". . . there's another world out

there . . . that has nothing to do with all your collapsed paperdolls, Wall Street, artificiality, cities."²

Throughout American history the dream of a New World echoes--a quest for renewal and rebirth. Janis Stout's The Journey Narrative in American Literature (1983) describes that characteristic American outlook, the "expansive hope and the restlessness that . . . have seemed to many the prevailing tone of the American imagination . . ." (21). Merrick, sickened by the monotony of life in "the frenzied city of stupid ants" (TN 4), weighed his alternatives and decided he had to return to unspoiled nature. Merrick's quest brought him to Labrador--a Labrador that becomes both a real and an emblematic landscape in his work, the embodiment of a powerful and potentially dangerous vision.

Merrick as writer-explorer comes not to exploit this northern land in the physical sense, not to map or conquer it, but to mine it for its stories and to test his mettle against it. Its harsh winter climate held the potential for shaping character even as it influenced events and directed people's existences. In Merrick's Labrador books, a beautiful and uncaring nature provides the setting for his characters' lives and the framework for their stories. It also serves as vehicle for Merrick's habitual northern meta-narratives and background for his mythologizing of life in the North.

The physical landscape intrudes constantly in Merrick's northern works, particularly in Frost and Fire, with its many references to land and water formations (rivers, lakes, bays, points) and to place-names. Labrador predominates. As critic

Raymond Holden noted in The Saturday Review of Literature (22 July 1939), "Mr. Merrick evidently does not evaluate human character with the same graphic talent by means of which he absorbs and gives back to the reader his sense of place." Critics acclaimed Merrick's earlier book, True North, for its portrayal of the land, as did the reviewer for the Boston Transcript (11 March 1933), who caught Merrick's enthusiasm for Labrador. He observed, "The sensitively painted verbal pictures of inland Labrador, its trackless snow wildernesses, its ice-jewelled lakes and rivers, its forests of balsam and pine, its exquisite sunrises, its glorious sunsets, are not only lovely in themselves but are happily reminiscent of Louis Hémon's masterpiece."

Northern Nurse, by its nature, concentrates more on its heroine's medical adventures, but the land and sea hover in the background. Having to battle winter blizzards to reach patients adds to the book's excitement and suspense. Northern nature's revitalizing power is also emphasized in this work. In Indian Harbour, Kate likes to lie on a ledge with her face close to the waves. "And there, somehow I was renewed," she reflects. "It was nothing I did. It was the ocean's doing" (NN 35).

Nature's mysterious ability to transform and rejuvenate proves a common theme for American romantic writers. Merrick's foreword to True North quotes from Thoreau's Walden, and the title of his second Labrador book borrows from the same quotation, with Thoreau's desire to find reality "below freshet and frost and fire" (Thoreau 154). The Thoreauvian influence is plain in Merrick's attitude to Labrador. Merrick's short stay in the North parallels Thoreau's temporary sojourn in the wilds

near Walden Pond. Thoreau's "Great Snow" (Thoreau 201) becomes Merrick's "great Unknowable" (TN 328). For Thoreau, Walden remains "perennially young" (302); for Merrick's character Jan and his family, travelling in Labrador seems like "paddling into the heart of time itself. . . . The river never ceased running, nor the days which flowed out of measureless time" (FF 286). Thoreau's stay in the forest represents an exploration of his inner self, while Merrick also seeks his own identity and a spiritual homeland. "One has to be here in the cold, going home to partridge stew in a cabin, on hard legs, with the snow crunching, with months of the life behind one, to feel the red sky and the fading light creeping into one's muscles and brain and nerves to motivate one's life for ever after (TN 211)," he insists.

Both Thoreau and Merrick praise the beauty and the dream-enhancing power of the wilds. Thoreau describes Walden and White Pond as "great crystals on the surface of the earth . . . too pure to have a market value. . . . How much more beautiful than our lives, how much more transparent than our characters, are they" (312)! Merrick also praises Labrador's superiority to mere humans, describing it as a "land too strong to be spoiled by men," a "land of fathomless beauty" (TN 200). Thoreau writes of man's need to witness his own limits surpassed (489-90), his need for the mysterious and unexplorable. Merrick reaches for an almost tangible dream, as if he is about to cross "some invisible threshold, on the other side of which lies magic" (TN 245). Thoreau claims to learn from his Walden experience ". . . that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life

which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours" (498-99). Elliott Merrick's Labrador books transmit the same message. For him and for his wife, in Labrador "there is everything we dreamed and at one time despaired of ever finding in life and the world" (TN 352).

These dreams, however, can be dangerous. Elliott Merrick's attitude differs markedly from that of Thoreau in one respect: Merrick's awe of nature's beauty is tempered with a healthy fear of its power. His experiences in the much harsher Labrador climate, combined with his agnosticism, led him to see nature as an all-encompassing, powerful, and sometimes menacing force. Kate Austen sees the bay stretching out from North West River as "a great white highway of dreams," but she qualifies this with her assertion, "But I never knew anything that could flatten dreams quicker than a winter gale on Hamilton Inlet" (NN 233). Labrador's seductive beauty can lull one into a complacent, almost hallucinatory state, leaving one vulnerable to the danger behind that beauty. A sense of this peril counteracts Merrick's appreciation of the northern wilderness, for he often sees this land as stern and heartless, reducing men to specks or bugs. Its impressive vastness may be the closest Merrick can come to an idea of a God. Looking down on Lake Winnikapau, he meets with an unforgettable vista: ". . . our high-rimmed, isolated world was Godlike for a moment and unearthly in the hugeness of its desolation" (TN 334).

It is only through force of will or the romantic imagination that people leave any kind of an impression on this impassive landscape, albeit an impression easily

obliterated. The snow that drifts through Merrick's Labrador books acts as an erasing and transforming force as well as a kind of text on which people write their life stories. Its ethereal quality equates it with the imagination, transforming a vista from enchanting to menacing, depending on its beholder. Kate Austen's romantic view of the snow is quashed by that of a pragmatic Labradorian: "One day late last fall at North West River, when the trees were heavy with snow, she remarked how beautiful they were to a grizzled old veteran named Fred Rich. He laughed and said, 'Yes, and I wonder how beautiful you'd think they was if you had to cut and carry all day in the woods'" (TN 94).

For Merrick, the snow is a work of art, sculpted by the wind, marked by the snowshoe trails of men which speak messages "to whatever solitary wanderer may cross them ere the next big wind or snowfall . . ." (TN 180). People's lives appear just as transitory and insignificant, etched in the snow and soon erased. But the artist adds an aura of permanence with his heroic and inspiring tales. His romantic imagination adds a mythical quality to those lives and captures them with the written word: at least in the realm of art, they are no longer transient.

Merrick views Labrador events and characters, shaped by the uncaring wilds, as treasured story material. As artist and outsider, he does not wish to change the land or its people; instead, he wants to encapsulate them as he perceives them, to suspend them in time. In all his Labrador works he takes artistic liberties and imposes his own views on the texts of Labradorian lives. He depicts Labrador as a unique

story setting. "Where will we ever see again life that is art and art that is life like this?" (TN 310) he asks. The intensity and beauty Merrick sees in northern existences impress themselves on his writing and provide proof for him that his philosophy of the simple life is indeed valid.

Unfeeling Labrador nature gives emphasis to the ephemeral quality of northern lives, adding to the poignancy of existence and fuelling Merrick's romanticism. His many references to the northern lights carry a wistful air, as if the aurora cast a spell doomed to be broken. Merrick's heavenward gaze strengthens the idea of dream-seeking and mythology. He sees past mundane existence to a cold and pitiless but enchanting beyond whose distant beauty renders humanity even more fragile. The northern lights diminish Luce Campbell: "High overhead the beating throbbing shafts of colored light crisscrossed, merged and churned in red-foamed, green-hearted masses while she stood enthralled, lost, a tiny figure with back-thrown head, miles from shore." As we see her, "she was so small under the wide dome of subarctic night, so lost in the sky" (FF 211). The ending of Frost and Fire reflects that hopeful resurgence of the romantic vision, that desire for eternity which can never be fulfilled. As Jan and Luce watch the colours flashing in the cold sky, Jan wishes his parents were alive and knew of his success. The book ends with Luce's reference to myth: "'Jan,' she said, 'Indians claim the lights are spirits of the dead ones dancing'" (FF 334).

Such mythical hopes, so apparent in all Merrick's Labrador works, underlie

Merrick's attraction to the Labrador wilds, and in many ways his dreams echo those of early explorers of that territory, such as Cabot and the Hubbards. The area with its harsh beauty proved a magnet for them as well as for him, but other attractions predominated. The idea of leaving one's imprint on that land lured the Hubbards. Cabot's main desire was to meet and commune with the Innu of the Labrador interior. Merrick, though, saw the landscape itself, creator of heroes, as paramount. He writes, "It is the land, the long white lakes, the forests and mountains and rivers, the space and the northern lights and the cold and beauty. Nothing within the scope of our comprehension is as worth knowing as the heart of that" (TN 324).

This dream of knowing the heart of the land fuelled northern explorers, many of whom are mentioned by Merrick in True North, but they had other goals as well. They did not necessarily envision the Labrador landscape as transforming their characters. Instead they often wished to leave their stamp on the area, by mapping or charting it or leaving their names on some remote lakes or rivers. Merrick instead expected and hoped that the land would transform him.

There is no better example of one man's attempt to leave his mark on Labrador than the tragic story of Leonidas Hubbard, whose 1903 expedition into the interior led to his death and the near-starvation of his two companions, Dillon Wallace and George Elson. In True North, Merrick mentions that he often thinks of Wallace's and Hubbard's trip "and how different that tale might have been if they had had a good trout net and a native guide" (TN 78). He also refers to Bert Blake's

adventures as a guide with Mina Hubbard's later expedition from North West River to Ungava (TN 10). Merrick's recent The Long Crossing and Other Labrador Stories (1992) contains his own chronicling of the Hubbard expedition and the later 1905 expeditions of Mina Hubbard and Dillon Wallace in his story "The Long Crossing." In this story, Hubbard exemplifies the snaring power of Labrador, the danger of becoming hypnotized by the wilderness and trapped in the vision of a new world.

A significant passage in Dillon Wallace's account of the expedition describes the strange feeling, the growing sense of alienation from civilization, that Hubbard expressed on July 27, 1903, along with the very different reaction of the James Bay native guide, George Elson:

'You sort of feel, that as you are now, so you always have been and always will be, and your past life is like a dream, and your friends like dream-folk. What a strange sensation it is! Have you felt that way, George?'

George took the pipe from his mouth, blew out a cloud of tobacco smoke to join the smoke of the fire, and spat meditatively over his shoulder.

'Don't know as I have,' he grunted. 'I know there's mighty good huntin' down the bay; and I've been thinkin' of Rupert's House . . . and what the fellus I know there are doin' these days. I can't say they seem like dream-folks to me; they're real enough, all right" (The Lure of the Labrador Wild 74).

While Merrick depicts the tragedy of a man immersed in a dream, he also suggests that Hubbard was not spiritually close enough to the land to succeed. The mystery of Labrador nevertheless drew him in. Merrick writes, "In distant New York, this huge unknown with its intricate crisscross of streams and brooding lakes full of beauty and danger had exerted an irresistible pull on Hubbard. . . . The

Labrador dream seized him" (TLC 94-5). Merrick does not dwell on the numerous errors of the Hubbard expedition.³ He sympathizes with the dreamer in his plight--for all three men for whom Lake Michikamau remains "the will-o-the-wisp they could not capture" (TLC 98). The most heroic character of Merrick's story is not Hubbard, but George Elson. After the three men decide to turn back from their quest, Elson dreams that they should follow the Beaver River. Hubbard demurs, and they miss a chance at survival. Ironically, Elson's dream proves to be the only valid one of the Hubbard expedition. Merrick implies that those native to the wilderness, those whose minds are "uncluttered by the litter that dims 'educated' mentalities" (TLC 101) have a subconscious link with the land, a key to its mystery.

Such native prescience appears elsewhere in Merrick's work. Elson's dream recalls that of trapper Dan Michelin in True North, whose recurring dream of a white bear fills him with a feeling of impending danger. This premonition saves his life when he narrowly misses being swept away by a great wall of ice. He comments to Merrick, "'You, b'y, with your learnin'. . . . You don't put much store by a dream I s'pose. You thinks dreams is dreams and alone in the woods they gits wirkin' in a feller's head. . . . I tell you, lad, but fer the white bear I'd be dead'" (TN 260).

Despite the failure of Hubbard's hopes, Merrick still portrays him as a suffering hero whose fascination with a huge and dangerous land led to his death. After Labrador trappers retrieve Hubbard's body, Merrick reflects upon man's insignificance compared to nature: "Snow, snow, snow, every day, and the three

small black specks crawling down the great white lake . . ." (TLC 113). Merrick continues his references to the vastness and menace of Labrador as he tells of the subsequent 1905 expeditions of Hubbard's wife, Mina, and of Dillon Wallace. He writes of the "grandeur of the land," the northern lights, and the "gigantic wilderness," with Mina's journey specifically referred to as a "quest" (TLC 121). Mina does reach her husband's goal, Lake Michikamau, "that great lake of dreams" (TLC 124). Merrick ends what he calls the "saga" of the three expeditions by paying special tribute to their native guides, "the men who carry the loads" (TLC 136).

But Dillon Wallace's 1905 expedition does not draw the same sympathy from Merrick. "The Long Crossing" shows Wallace making numerous errors of judgment that seem traceable to his disrespect for his native guides. This attitude removes him a step further from intimate knowledge of the land. Elsewhere, Merrick makes his opinion clear on "come-from-aways": "So many of the prominent CFA's such as Cartwright, Dillon Wallace, and hundreds of others thought themselves superior just because they had more money and had been handed on a silver platter more so-called 'advantages'."⁴ Merrick describes Wallace as having "no flair for reading Indian minds or making friends with 'natives'" (TLC 129). In his own story of his 1905 expedition to Ungava, Wallace writes that "it is safe to say that there is not a truthful Indian in Labrador. In fact it is considered an accomplishment to lie cheerfully and well" (The Long Labrador Trail 214). Merrick decries Wallace's efforts to cast himself "in the role of Hubbard's spiritual savior" (TLC 134), and his

accomplishments seem dimmed by egotism. Instead, Merrick eulogizes George Elson, the man closest to the land. He is assured that ". . . Elson's magnificent achievement . . . will always remain in distinct contrast to Wallace's effort" (TLC 136). Elson is Merrick's ideal northern hero.

Leonidas Hubbard's own diary mirrors the romantic idealism of Merrick, but Hubbard sees the land as awaiting his imprint, not as shaping superior character. Hubbard esteems Dillon Wallace as much as he does George Elson, as "two of the very best, bravest, and grandest men I ever knew" (Hubbard 253).⁵ He views Labrador as virgin region awaiting his footstep, and his stated goal is a certain geographical location, Lake Michikamau. The land lures Hubbard. His diary entry of July 7, 1903, heralds his arrival in the North: "This morning the shore of Labrador spread out before us in the sunshine. It calls ever so hard, and I am hungry to tackle it" (205). He ignores negative prophecies about his planned journey (209), much as the young Merrick ignored Fred Goudie's warnings about letting John Michelin take too many risks with Kate on Grand River (TN 47). Hubbard, though, seems to have been less aware of the dangers of the wilderness than was Merrick. By August 30, the Hubbard expedition is in trouble, but Hubbard asserts, "The feeling of not knowing where we are or how to get out adds to our weakness, still we are all cheerful and hopeful and without fear" (Hubbard 230).

Hubbard remains focused on a geographical entity, Merrick on a testing of his soul. Merrick takes joy in the process of the journey itself, "the travelling and the

people met on the way, not the getting there" (TN 229). Hubbard seems blindly obsessed with reaching Lake Michikamau. His September 11 entry states, "We are on the verge of success apparently, in sight of Michikamau . . ." (Hubbard 236). Stormy weather and starvation prevent his dream from materializing; instead he begins to fantasize about food and home. Callous Nature dissolves the heroic dreams as the three men slowly deteriorate. But even in his last diary entry (October 18), Hubbard writes, ". . . I believe we will all get out" (254).

Mina Hubbard's book A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador (1908) describes how Hubbard's dream to cross Labrador was taken up by his wife, who displays a romantic and Christian idealism like her husband's. Like Merrick, she is awed by the picturesque country, constantly using the terms "beauty" and "beautiful" and romantically describing the northern lights as "a benediction from the hand of God himself . . . great, beautiful scrolls" (84). But her main goal is to map and chart the Labrador landscape; in fact, her dream is to do "work which would for ever associate my husband's name with the country where he hoped to begin his explorations" (83). She gives more of Hubbard's background, similar in some respects to Merrick's, with his father's love of the out-of-doors and his own early journalistic work. Mina Hubbard, like Kate Austen, was a trained nurse and she, too, earns the admiration of her trapper guides. Merrick repeats Gilbert Blake's comment, "'She were a true lady, Mrs. Hubbard, and less trouble than most men'" (TLC 128).

William Brooks Cabot, another American lured by Labrador, gave much less

romanticized accounts of his northern expeditions of the early 1900s. Cabot readily admits that Labrador cannot appeal to the many: "It is too elemental a land" (Cabot 1). Rather than giving romantic portrayals of it, he casts a geologist's eye, as in this observation: "The glacial movement over the country during the last of the ice period, as shown by its striae, was somewhat east of southeast, but along this divide it took its north of east direction; part of the ice, however, going south down the Gulf valleys" (302-03). He devotes much of his book to the wild animals of the North, many of whom he kills for his own use, and also to the "repulsive swarm" of flies (149) he must constantly deal with on his journeys. He also assigns an entire chapter to mice, which he sees as playing a huge role "in the economy of barren ground life" (292). Such details detract from any notions of romanticism, as do Cabot's descriptions of some of his transactions with the natives. He records having to pay Edmund Winters five dollars for seal trousers worth half as much: "After some talk I ungraciously took them and handed over the bill, telling him not to think every Yankee traveler was going to pay double price" (157).

Despite this seemingly unromantic outlook, Cabot, too, feels the pull of the Labrador dream. He too mentions the northern lights, and, like Merrick, refers to the Indians' belief that they are spirits of the dead. Cabot is not surprised at that belief. "If any manifestation of the inanimate has the aspect of the spiritual, it is this presence of the northern nights" (68), he allows. Like Merrick, Cabot romanticizes the Indians and their stories. He too is attracted to the magic of their myths: the

"Little People" hidden in the rocks, the "Under-water People sleeping the winter away" (291). Cabot also mentions Leonidas Hubbard, Mina Hubbard, and other explorers. He shares Merrick's sympathy for Hubbard's failed dream and concedes, "Most of us minor wanderers who have been many times out have to thank fortune rather than our wits that some unforgotten day or night was not our last" (33).

Cabot's numerous forays into the northern Labrador interior do not entice him into an overwhelming sense of awe for the land. His purpose in journeying into Labrador was to make contact with the Naskaupi Indians. He had no desire to develop or map the territory (Loring 8). Cabot seems to hold a respect for the Innu akin to Merrick's esteem for the settler-trappers of central Labrador. Cabot summarizes his philosophy this way:

If I had never had the run of the fine north barrens with their game and fish I might have looked on what was about us as after all a good untouched wilderness, instinct with the expression of the forested north and in its way inspiring. As it was I was spoiled for it, though being out with the good young Indians made me decently contented and in fact pleased with the days. It is the human that really counts, for better or worse (Cabot 328).

The Merricks also had to acknowledge this when they, like other explorers and writers before them, were forced to leave Labrador. It was 1931 and the great Depression loomed. There was no money to be had in working for the Grenfell Mission, and Merrick refused to work for the Hudson's Bay Company, which he considered exploitative of Labradorians. He also could not trap well enough to make a living and disliked killing animals. He writes, "We had to go--to a life we were

trained to cope with--or stay and become objects of pity."⁶

Even Elliott Merrick's powerful romantic re-employment could not prevail against the mundane demands of existence. As he states, "A commitment to wilderness doesn't buy many groceries."⁷ Nevertheless his northern mythos remained to guide his life from then on. He was to continue his writing, producing a total of eight books and more than twenty-five stories and articles, but his days in Labrador had passed. Unable to support himself and a growing family on his writing alone, he went from a short stint as a truck driver in 1932 to farming, teaching school, teaching English at the University of Vermont and at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, to editing and writing for the Office of War Information during World War Two. He then worked for twenty-two years as science editor and publications officer at a research station of the United States Forest Service in Asheville, North Carolina.⁸ His wife Kate passed away in 1989, and he has since remarried.

He continues to praise the old Labrador and its people and has never forgotten "the peace and beauty and solitude of Labrador, which we loved so much, and our idyllic summer at lonely Goose Bay when it was a paradise undiscovered."⁹ He writes of the Labradorian influence on himself and his wife:

. . . the wilderness was always with us. . . . First of all, we were happy, and, second, the Labrador days influenced our lives and philosophy of life always thereafter--even made possible the kind of life we lived. We lived simply; we were never part of the mob; we knew that modern comforts and luxuries are really not important, but that living in the country, with birds, flowers, streams, fields, woods, is essential. . . . The wilds had made us hardy. . . . We were happy and very independent-minded. . . . That was our compromise

--as close to the wilderness ways as we could manage in our industrialized, urbanized society--always remembering Labrador, always hugging the wild days and ways to our hearts.'³

Myth and romance helped re-invent "reality" for Elliott Merrick. This writer's heroic view of the North enabled him to re-create himself as a transplanted settler-trapper, courageous and stalwart, making do quite happily with the simple life in rural America.

CONCLUSION

The Labrador that made possible the discoveries and dreams of so many explorers has been greatly transformed since the 1930s. What Elliott Merrick describes is "the oldtime Labrador of isolation, before planes or outboards or radio telephones."¹ The Labrador represented in his books is a land of heroism, adventure and anti-materialism. Merrick did feel the threat of future exploitation with the machine age's impending intrusion into that land. In True North, he mentions scientists' ideas of harnessing Muskrat Falls, transforming it "from a merry, rainbow-sprayed flume to some dreary turner of dynamos and things, the accomplice of a wondrous sawmill that would devastate the country farther than the eye can reach, pollute the crystal waters, drive out the fish and game, and make day laborers of a unique race of *coureurs des bois*" (TN 28). He contrasts this with his preferred notion of the falls, as haunted by the ghosts of two drowned Indian girls, whose spirits moan there each night. He later refers to more talk of harnessing Twin Falls or Grand Falls to a lumber mill (TN 195). He could hardly have foreseen the preoccupations of modern-day Labrador--native land rights, housing, suicide, alcoholism, pollution, low-level flying--ones which have led at least one journalist to refer to Labrador as having "the worst problems in the Canadian North."²

Nevertheless, Merrick's books and stories of Labrador, particularly True North, still speak to Labradorians, evoking a past when life was different and much simpler. His works prolong a dream of pioneer Labrador, preserving something

people want to believe about their past. Merrick's writing keeps that mythical past alive, and his idealism engenders renewed hopes. His narratives create a pastoral world, an "Eden of the North." The man who intended to leave no mark on the land has now cast it forever. His Labrador books map the territory.

R.L. Duffus, in The New York Times Book Review (5 March 1933), summed up what many readers of the 1930s must have thought of young Elliott Merrick's experiences in Labrador:

. . . not every one would want to "grow" by walking and working to exhaustion, by being half-frozen most of the time and half-starved almost continually and by continually risking one's life by freezing, drowning or some other of the commonplace accidents of the north woods. But the Merricks seem to have made a real success of it.

And Daines Barrington concurred in The Saturday Review of Literature (1 April 1933), viewing the Merricks as well-suited to Labrador life:

Their reading and apprenticeship with the trappers saved the Merricks from the incredibly unnecessary Labrador hardships of Leonidas Hubbard and Dillon Wallace. Their winter journey of six hundred miles was in consequence hard without hardships. They liked the life because they were fitted for it, as Hubbard and Wallace were not, by reading, experience, and temperament.

Merrick continues to maintain that his life has indeed been enriched by a return to pioneer values and a simple existence in the midst of northern nature. He reshaped and re-invented that northern wilderness not only in his writing, but in his philosophy of life. For the Merricks, the earth's heart and the core of their dreams lay in central Labrador. The Labrador vision remained in Elliott Merrick's mind, informing his intellect and influencing his actions. His lively romantic imagination not only

enlivened his existence. It created a northern paradise whose existence he held out to his readers as a form of salvation in an increasingly urbanized world.

The romantic imagination tested in northern surroundings promises a renewed vitality, although Merrick's Labrador tales also emphasize that impassive northern nature will remain long after we are no more. Elliott Merrick's vivid and impassioned writing attests to the power of his inner myths. He has ensured through his Labrador works that his romantic re-invention of the North will not easily be forgotten. His charismatic mythos fuels our notions of heroism, and we may thus alter our own "reality." This artist's triumph is that his perception of the North will continue to inspire future readers. Although his romanticized Labrador cannot be expected to outlast the northern wilderness, it will nevertheless echo in memory far beyond the scope of one frail human life.

ENDNOTES**Chapter One**

1. EM, letter to DB, 3 Oct. 1991.
2. EM, unpublished, untitled article sent to DB, July 1992.
3. EM, taped commentary sent to DB, Nov. 1991.
4. EM, unpublished article, July 1992.
5. EM, taped commentary, Nov. 1991.
6. See William Wordsworth's "The Sublime and the Beautiful."
7. See Patrick O'Flaherty's The Rock Observed (Toronto 1979).
8. Harry Paddon is mistakenly referred to as Harold Paddon on the cover of Green Woods and Blue Waters (St. John's 1989).
9. EM, letter to DB, 3 Oct. 1991.
10. Later renamed the Hamilton River and then changed again to the Churchill River in 1965.
11. See excerpts from accounts of John McLean, Judge Pinsent, and A.P. Low, quoted in David Zimmerly, Cain's Land Revisited (St. John's 1975).
12. For first-hand accounts of the settler women's lives, see Lydia Campbell's Sketches of Labrador Life (1894) and Elizabeth Goudie's Woman of Labrador (Toronto 1973).
13. Compare trapper Bert Blake's account in Zimmerly's Cain's Land Revisited and John Parsons's accounts in Labrador: Land of the North (New York 1970).
14. EM, taped commentary, Nov. 1991.
15. Quotations from EM's letter to DB, 21 Jan. 1992. For descriptions of the icepan incident, see Sir Wilfred Grenfell, The Story of a Labrador Doctor

(London 1925), 109-17, and Ronald Rompkey, Grenfell of Labrador: A Biography (Toronto 1991), 143-46. There is a brief reference to the incident in Northern Nurse, 61.

16. EM, letter to DB, 25 July 1992.
17. For a full discussion of the monomyth, see Joseph Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces (Princeton 1949).
18. EM, unpublished article, July 1992.
19. Them Days, a quarterly magazine published in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, documents the early days and old ways of Labrador.

Chapter Two

1. EM, letter to Anne Hart, 1987, EM Papers (Coll. 96, No. 4).
2. EM, letter to unnamed person, 19 Nov. 1986, EM Papers (Coll. 96, No. 4).
3. This quote and the previous one are excerpted from Earle Walbridge's article, "Elliott Merrick," Wilson Library Bulletin 24.1 (1949): 328.
4. EM, telephone interview with DB, 7 Nov. 1991.
5. EM, letter to DB, 27 Aug. 1992. His emphases.
6. See Them Days (Jan. 1991): 3-12.
7. See Them Days (Jan. 1991): 17.
8. See Them Days (Jan. 1991): 22.
9. See Them Days (Jan. 1991): 37.
10. See Them Days (Sept. 1983): 60.
11. EM, letter to DB, Nov. 1991.
12. See Them Days (Sept. 1976): 8.
13. EM, letter to DB, Aug. 1992.

14. EM, letter to DB, 27 Aug. 1992.
15. See Elliott Merrick, Green Mountain Farm (New York 1948) for a description of his life in Vermont.
16. EM, letter to DB, 27 Aug. 1992.
17. See Book First, lines 425-63, of William Wordsworth, The Prelude (1850).

Chapter Three

1. "Without Words," recently reissued in The Long Crossing and Other Labrador Stories (1992), was first published in Scribner's Magazine (Jan. 1938). A similar incident is recorded in Harry Paddon's Green Woods and Blue Waters, 243-45, but it appears to have occurred after the publication of "Without Words."
2. See Millicent Blake Loder's autobiography, Daughter of Labrador (St. John's 1989).
3. EM, taped commentary, Nov. 1991. Dr. Harry Paddon, Mina Paddon's husband, was the father of author Harry Paddon and is extensively mentioned in Northern Nurse.
4. In a letter to DB, 25 July 1992, EM writes that he took no story ideas from the Paddons' trading venture.
5. In a taped biographical commentary sent to Ronald Rompkey in 1989, EM tells of Maxwell Perkins' opposition to profanity or explicit sexual scenes.
6. See Elizabeth Goudie's Woman of Labrador (1973), pp. 6, 17.
7. Quotations in this paragraph come from EM's letter to DB, Aug. 1992 with his emphases.
8. EM, letter to DB, 21 Jan. 1992.
9. Quotations in this paragraph are from EM's letter to Anne Hart, 1987, EM Papers (Coll. 96, No. 4).
10. EM, letter to DB, 27 Aug. 1992. His emphasis.

11. EM, letter to Ronald Rompkey, 30 Dec. 1984.

Chapter Four

1. EM, letter to DB, Aug. 1992.
2. Quotations in this paragraph are excerpted from EM's letter to DB, Aug. 1992.
3. EM, letter to DB, 13 Jan. 1993.
4. EM, letter to DB, Aug. 1992.
5. EM, taped biographical commentary sent to Ronald Rompkey, 1989.
6. This and the previous two quotations are excerpted from EM's taped commentary sent to DB, Nov. 1991.
7. EM, taped biographical commentary sent to Ronald Rompkey.
8. EM, letter to Elizabeth Johns, Director, U of Maine P, 8 May 1989.
9. Millicent Loder, interview with DB, 21 Apr. 1992.
10. Quotations in this and the following two paragraphs come from EM's letter to DB, 24 Jan. 1993.
11. EM, letter to unnamed person, 19 Nov. 1986, EM Papers (Coll. 96, No. 4).
12. Dr. W.A. Paddon is the son of Dr. Harry Paddon of Northern Nurse.
13. EM, letter to DB, 30 Nov. 1992.

Chapter Five

1. EM, taped commentary, Nov. 1991.
2. EM, letter to Anne Hart, 1987, EM Papers (Coll. 96, No. 4).
3. For a detailed description of the Hubbard expedition and its errors, see "An Ill-Fated Expedition," in Labrador (Amsterdam 1977), by Robert Stewart and

the editors of Time-Life Books, pp. 78-97.

4. EM, letter to DB, Nov. 1991.
5. Mina Hubbard includes the Labrador diary of her husband, Leonidas, as well as a narrative by George Elson, in her book, A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador (1908).
6. EM, unpublished article sent to DB, July 1992.
7. EM, letter to Ronald Rompkey, 30 Dec. 1984.
8. Biographical information comes from EM's self-written obituary, included with a letter to Ronald Rompkey, 30 Dec. 1984.
9. EM, letter to Anne Hart, 1987, EM Papers (Coll. 96, No. 4).
10. Excerpted from EM's unpublished article sent to DB, July 1992.

Conclusion

1. EM, letter to DB, 27 Aug. 1992.
2. See Cathy White's article, "Labrador: The Worst Problems in the Canadian North," Atlantic Insight (Oct. 1986).

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