Stephen Loring

In Torngak's Realm: The Nineteenth-Century Photography of Moravian Missionaries in Labrador

Introduction

Labrador – for many *qallunaat* the name has been synonymous with a bleak and barren landscape, an ice-scoured wilderness, isolated and forlorn. While it was among the first lands in the New World to be visited by Europeans, it remained among the last to be mapped. Prior to the inroads of the missionaries it was inhabited by malevolent spirits, by Torngak. It was, in the celebrated words of Jacques Cartier – who despaired of ever finding a harbour – the 'land that God gave Cain'. Yet this Cain's Land, this realm of Torngak, was home for small bands of scattered Inuit families whose knowledge and skills had made that land their home.

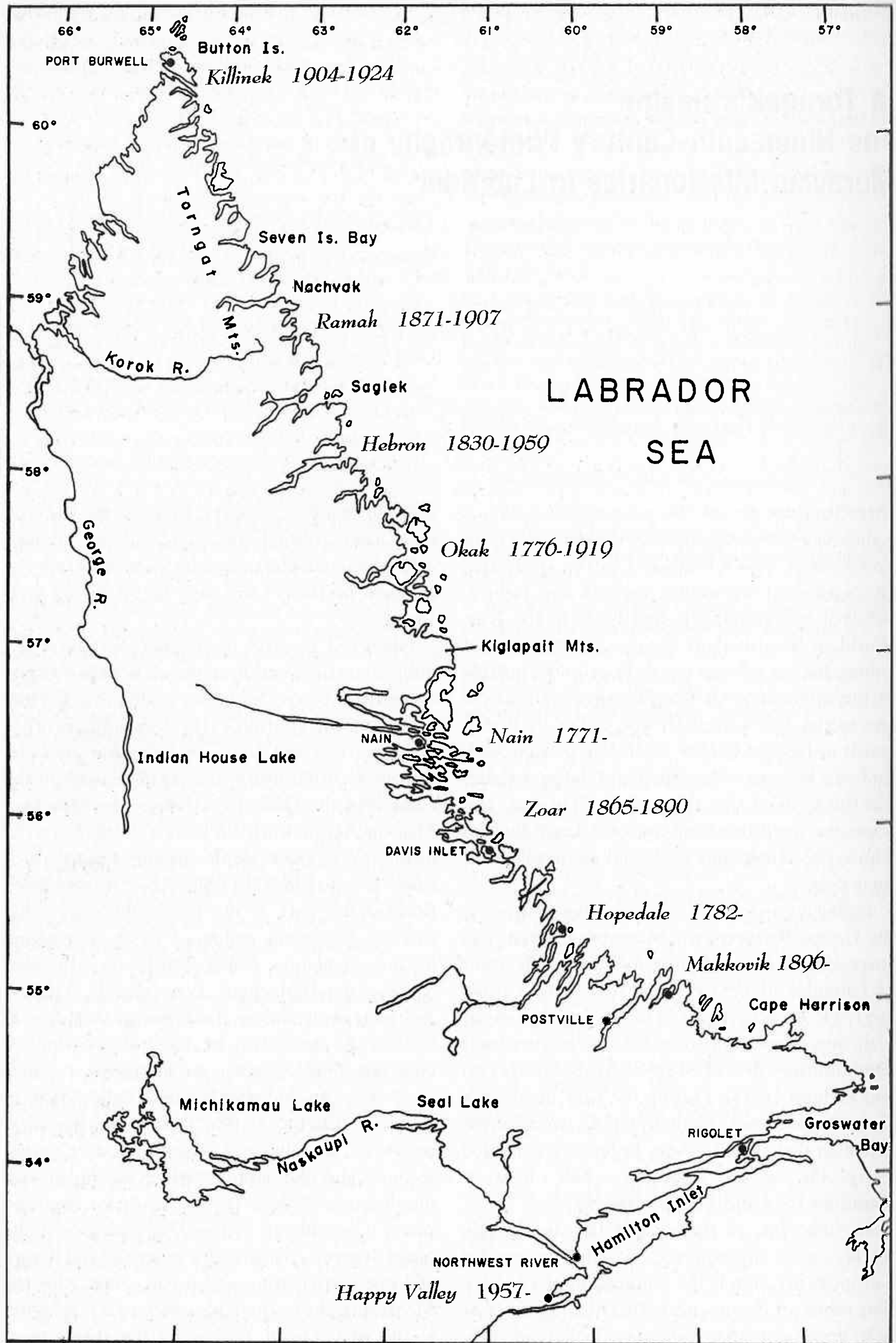
Following an initial disastrous attempt in 1752, the United Brethren, the Moravian Church, was successful in establishing a mission to the Inuit of Labrador in 1771 (Davey 1905; Hiller 1966, 1971; H. Kleivan 1966). The first settlement at Nain soon expanded to include 'Christian Inuit communities' at Okak (1776), Hopedale (1782) and Hebron (1830). During the later nineteenth century additional mission stations were established so that the Moravian hegemony extended along the entire Labrador coast between Hamilton Inlet and Ungava Bay (fig.1).

In Labrador, as throughout the non-literate world, one consequence of the successful European invasion is the domination of a history that relies on documents rather than oral tradition; documents that justify an ideology of colonialism and which shape, manipulate and interpret perceptions of the past. Western scholarship, its science and letters, has for the most part marginalised the voice of indigenous peoples. This lopsided view of culture and history has had a devastating impact on recent generations of northern villagers, who, having suffered from having much of their cultural heritage defined by outsiders, are only now asserting the primacy of their voice and the voice of their ancestors.

Historical research pertaining to Labrador's indigenous Inuit and Innu populations brings one up against two extraordinary archives: (1) the records of the Hudson's Bay Company, incorporated in 1670 and active in Labrador since the late eighteenth century, and (2) the records of the Church of the United Brethren – the Moravian Mission. Much of what is known about the recent history of the Inuit people of Labrador is derived from the writings of Moravian missionaries. Fortunately, part of the Protestant work ethic that the Moravians embraced was a compulsion for documentation. Consequently, the Moravian Archives (at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, London and Herrnhut, and in the National Archives of Canada and the Provincial Archives in St John's, Newfoundland) contain an incredible treasure trove of written and visual materials: the *Periodical Accounts*,[1] diaries, station reports, ecclesiastical musings, shipping inventories, letters, store accounts and photography, which – coupled with the duration of these records (now for over 200 years) – provide an extraordinary picture of the social dynamics, subsistence strategies and nature of Inuit participation and involvement with the Moravians, thus providing a very rich perception of the past, biased as it is by the structure of Moravian beliefs and practices.

Throughout the Moravian tenure in Labrador there was a persistent controversy over the problem of combining the Moravians' primary evangelical objectives with their very lucrative entrepreneurial and trade initiatives. The

Fig. 1. Labrador with mission stations and dates.



Moravians strove forcefully to present this trade as a necessary inconvenience tangential to their primary purpose of saving souls. In order to proselytise for Christ, the Moravians had first to attract and then anchor the nomadic Inuit to the Christian communities they desired to create in the wilderness. This they were only able to do by acquiescing to the demands of the Inuit to provide them with European manufactured products, food items and raw materials. As the

Christian communities grew and became more linked to a global world economy, the Moravians sought to justify their mercantile interests to their European supporters by elaborating on their need to continue the struggle against the heathen elements in Inuit society. In so doing, the Moravians 'constructed' a dichotomy between the orderly hard-working 'Christian Inuit' of the mission villages and the 'Heathens' – the feral, wandering hunters of the north. With the advent of photography the Moravians were provided with a new means to present themselves and their work to Christian charities and philanthropists in Great Britain and Europe.

The Moravian Church

The United Brethren, or Moravians, are a Protestant missionary sect that originated in central Europe during the late fifteenth century. In 1722 a number of Moravians congregated about the estate of Count Zinzendorf at Herrnhut near the German–Polish border, and formed the nucleus of the modern Church. Communal life at Herrnhut emphasised diligence, work, orderliness, punctuality and frugality. It became the social model to which the Moravians believed all human societies should aspire. The certainty of their moral and spiritual belief sustained them in their confrontations with indigenous and non-Western peoples throughout the non-Christian world. The Moravians were one of the first Protestant Churches to promote a foreign mission enterprise beginning in the West Indies in 1732, and expanding thereafter to maroon communities in Nicaragua and Dutch Guiana, to Greenland, Labrador, eastern North America, India, Tibet, South Africa and Alaska.

Moravians in Labrador

LESSONS IN POWER AND AUTHORITY

The Moravians' zeal, which sustained them in the wilderness of Labrador, was founded in their belief in their ability, with God's help, to transform the barrenness and anarchy of the heathen's country into a land of Christian piety and order. The Inuit proved to be formidable adversaries. Through tact, diplomacy, intrigue and aggression the Inuit had in the two centuries prior to 1750 gained considerable experience in dealing with Europeans, and had acquired a strong desire for European manufactured products and raw materials. During this early contact period in Labrador, historical records and archaeology point to the emergence of a group of powerful native leaders who were able to consolidate their authority along two lines of control: one economic, as 'trading captains' or 'big men', powerful family heads who controlled access to European products; and the other religious, in the form of the powerful shaman-sorcerers, or *angakkuk*, who interceded with the powers of the spirit world. Often, prominent Inuit 'leaders' would be both. It is exactly along these lines, access to trade goods and as an intermediary between humans and the spiritual world, that the Moravian agenda in Labrador would have coincided with traditional trends of authority.

Prior to the arrival of the Moravians there existed a state of internecine raiding, murder and anarchy along the southern Labrador coast where European and Inuit cultures collided. This situation precluded the expansion of British interests in their North Atlantic fishery. The Governor of Newfoundland, Sir Hugh Palliser, acting with the belief that the missionaries' influence might prove the means to pacify the Inuit, was instrumental in arranging for a royal land-grant and trading concession in northern Labrador in 1769.

The Moravians established their first Labrador mission at Nain in 1771 and from that time forward the Moravian and Inuit identities have been closely entwined. Except for the annual voyage of their supply vessel, the *Harmony,* and the chance visit from fishermen and explorers, the Moravians were completely cut off from their European homeland. No one can doubt the power of the faith that sustained them in their self-imposed exile.

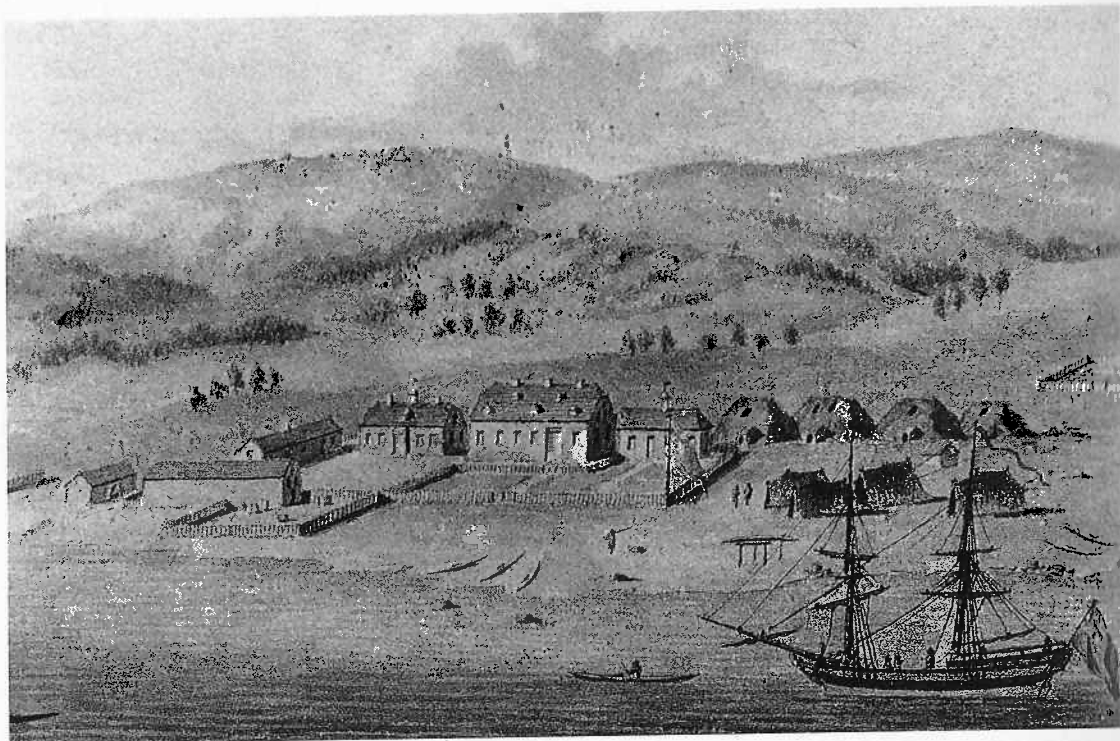
The early years of the Labrador mission were fraught with tension as the memory of native treachery remained:

> All accounts agreed in representing them as heathen of the worst stamp, treacherous, cruel and bloodthirsty in their dealings, with scarcely a trace of religion of any kind, enslaved by the darkest superstition, and entirely ruled by the powerful influences of their sorcerers. (PA28:1, 1871)

In the Labrador of the Moravians the wild barren land was a mute testament to the wilderness of men's souls. In order to win conscripts for Christ, the Moravians had to challenge the authority of the traditional leaders. While the battle for souls may have taken place on a spiritual plane, the battlefield resided on earth, and had much to do with access to resources. Throughout the nineteenth century, as the Inuit become more desirous and more dependent on European supplies and more acquiescent to the advantages of seasonal residence at the mission village, there is a transition from the nomadic, independent life that characterised traditional Inuit society to one that coincided with the Moravian precepts of a Christian community.

RIGHT
Fig.2. Nain, Labrador, *c*.1790.

BELOW
Fig.3. Nain, Labrador, *c*.1880.



THE GROWTH OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The architecture and landscaping of the mission stations was a powerful demonstration of Christian confrontation with the forces of chaos in the wild lands that surrounded them; mission stations imposed order on the wilderness. This physical transformation was a bulwark against the despair at the slow progress of Christianity among the Inuit; it was also a very tangible testimony to the existence, promise and potential of the mission. That these Moravian views sometimes clashed with those of the Inuit is no surprise: 'At first [they were] opposed to our idea of building the huts in a straight line, they eventually acquiesced in our wish and were finally quite pleased with the appearance of the row of . . . houses, covered with sod.' (PA26:365–6, 1866.)

Moravian Archives have extensive visual materials documenting the growth of the Christian communities in Labrador: originally (in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) drawings, maps and plats (fig.2), and later on photographs (fig.3). Interestingly, there are very few drawings or representations of the Inuit in the early Moravian documents. With photography it becomes possible to testify to the success of mission activities by bringing the faces of the Inuit attached to the mission villages to the Moravian authorities and supporters in Europe.

The mission at Nain had not been established long before the Moravians realised that the varied resources on which the Inuit depended necessitated a high degree of mobility. However, not only did a wandering, rootless existence threaten