

The Records of the Moravian Mission in Labrador

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SINCE the middle of the eighteenth century the Moravian Brethren have been engaged in missionary activity among the Eskimos of northern Labrador. During much of this period Moravian missionaries have been virtually the only group of educated and literate people in this remote area. Their correspondence, reports, and other papers undoubtedly constitute the most extensive written records of the life of the Labrador Coast in existence today.

In 1771 the Moravians established at Nain their first mission station in Labrador. It remained the headquarters for the Labrador Mission until after World War II. The main impulse for the missionary venture came from the Brethren in Germany and in England. The former provided most of the personnel of the mission; the latter, through their missionary agency, the Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel, provided most of the financing and supply. It was also the Brethren in England who secured from the British Crown the necessary land grants for the mission settlements. Following the settlement at Nain, other mission stations were founded at Okak in 1776 and at Hopedale in 1782, to the north and south of Nain respectively. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries further mission posts were established on the Coast of Labrador, extending from Makkovik in the south, near Hamilton Inlet, to Killinek, close to Cape Chidley in the north. At present the Moravians still maintain four mission stations — Nain, Hopedale, and Makkovik on the coast, and an interior mission at Happy Valley, near Goose Bay, where the Superintendent of the Labrador Province is now stationed.

As the various mission settlements became established, the methodical German missionaries set up station archives, where were kept

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incoming letters, copies of outgoing ones, and other written records. Most of these records have been preserved intact through the years, though there have been inevitable losses consequent upon fires and the abandonment of stations. The present mission house at Hopedale dates from about 1850 and the original house erected in 1782 still stands. The Hebron mission house was prefabricated elsewhere in Labrador and in Europe, then shipped into the site and reconstructed piece by piece. It stands today, over a hundred years old, a unique structure worthy of preservation as a historical monument. Although a disastrous fire leveled the mission buildings at Nain in 1921 and destroyed most of the old records stored there, the frequent missionary practice of making several copies of important papers has reduced substantially the losses suffered.

In 1959 the Moravian establishment at Hebron, then the northernmost of the mission stations, was closed. It was judged an opportune time to remove from the Moravian archives on the coast those documents of historical importance in order to assure their continued preservation. In the summer of 1959, at the invitation of the Moravian church authorities, the Memorial University of Newfoundland sponsored a visit to the mission posts by the professor of German and the archivist-historian at the university. They obtained several cases of historical material. After these records were sorted and arranged at the university in St. John's, the Public Archives of Canada microfilmed them in Ottawa. The filmed material occupies 52 reels. The original records were then sent on to their final destination, the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The church books of the various mission stations, however, are to be returned to Labrador.

The records of the Moravian Mission in Labrador essentially cover the period from 1770 to the twentieth century. Most of them relate to the mission stations of Nain, Hopedale, and Hebron. The documents are generally in German, although some of the earliest and latest records are in English. Probably of first importance are the old church books of the various stations. They contain a comprehensive record of births, baptisms, confirmations, marriages, and deaths among the Eskimos and settlers in each locality. In addition they record the service of the Brothers and Sisters connected with each mission station.

There exists a formidable mass of correspondence written and received by the Brethren—letters to and from Europe and intra-Labrador correspondence. Much of the correspondence consists of letters to and from Labrador and the German Moravian centers of

Herrnhut and Berthelsdorf, the spiritual home of the missionaries. Of especial importance are the annual letters from the Conference of Moravian Elders (or Mission Board), in Germany, which acted as the directorate of the Labrador Mission. After the middle of the nineteenth century the annual letters to the mission posts were all essentially the same for each year. The annual letters dealt with a wide range of topics but with spiritual matters in particular. They brought general news of the home church, informed the missionaries about the recruitment, retirement, and death of church workers, mentioned Eskimo translations underway, and frequently commented on matters of church discipline. Sometimes they laid down rules for the missionaries to follow in their work with the natives. In turn the Brethren at each station returned annual "conference letters" to their superiors in Germany. In almost every case the missionaries made copies of these outgoing letters and filed them away in the station archives. The earlier letters in particular were copied with care on heavy paper. These copies are as legible today as when they were written. The conference letters to Germany covered practically everything of importance that had occurred during the past year. They reported on births, sicknesses, and deaths in the community; new members admitted into the church and members suspended; the weather of the past year; and hunting and fishing conditions.

The Moravian missionaries carried on a voluminous correspondence also with the Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel, the Moravian agency in London chiefly responsible for the material support of the Labrador Mission. It was the S. F. G. which sent out annually the supply ship that provided the necessities for the mission and brought back to Europe the produce of Labrador. A series of valiant vessels, among them the *Amity*, the *Good Intent*, the *Gleaner*, and the famous *Harmony* ships, navigated dangerous and scantily charted waters for a century and a half without serious mishap and never failed to reach Labrador. The mail of the annual boat always contained a letter from the S. F. G. to the Brethren at each station. (After 1834, essentially the same circular letter was sent to all the mission posts.) These annual letters informed the missionaries about changes in station personnel and told them what passengers were coming out on the ship, what provisions she was bringing, and the route she would follow. They also contained information on mission finances and on Moravian mission work elsewhere in the world. The letters were often supplemented by financial circulars, which dwelt in particular on the expenditures involved

in the operation of the mission, the progress of the trade carried on in Labrador, and the revenues derived from the sale in Europe of the cargo of the last year's ship. In the annual replies of the various stations to London, the missionaries presented a summary of the year's activities. Although the letters included personal news about the missionaries and reported on the progress of the work among the Eskimos, matters relating to the material welfare of the mission were featured prominently: hunting and fishing conditions, trading operations, stocks of goods on hand, and supplies needed. The letters often brought up financial questions, such as whether or not the Eskimos should have to pay for their medicines.

In addition to the overseas correspondence, there was a constant interchange of letters among the various mission posts in Labrador. This correspondence stretches back to the days of the first mission stations and, indeed, is in some cases more complete for the earlier years. Much of the correspondence consists of letters to and from the superintendents of the Labrador Mission—August Freitag, Theodore Bourquin, C. A. Martin, and the other missionary leaders who followed each other into the office on the call of the Mission Board. The missionaries discussed among themselves the goods to be ordered from Europe for the next year, the produce to be shipped to Europe, the agenda and dates of the next General Labrador Mission Conference, and plans for undertaking long journeys or starting new mission settlements. Naturally many letters dealt with the health of the Eskimos and of the Brothers and Sisters themselves. Frequently one mission station asked another for goods in short supply, especially nails, thongs, and dogfood.

Supplementing the mission correspondence are the station diaries. Each mission post faithfully kept a diary and sent copies to Germany and London in the form of annual reports. The diaries are intimate and detailed chronicles of life at the various settlements from year to year. They report on the arduous journeys made by the missionaries, the spiritual advance of the Moravian communities, the church services and festivals held, and the poverty and disease all too frequently present on the coast. The diaries include comment on climatic conditions from year to year; the supply of codfish, seals, and whales on the coast and of caribou and fur-bearing animals in the interior; and the subsequent effect upon the welfare of the natives. Even such domestic details as the progress of the mission gardens, cultivated in the brief subarctic summer, find their place. Many of the diaries present statistics at the end of the year, giving the number of Eskimos living at the mission sta-

tion, the number of children and adults baptized that year, and so forth.

The Moravian records also include reports of proceedings of the various church conferences held in Labrador: the General Labrador Mission Conference, usually convoked yearly by the Superintendent, and the mission and house conferences of each station. The General Labrador Mission Conference reviewed the progress of the work among the Eskimos and the conduct of the trade by the store Brothers. Subject to the approval of the Mission Board, it decided all important questions that concerned the whole or a part of the missionary work in Labrador. The mission conferences of each station dealt primarily with the spiritual life of the community: the conversion of the Eskimos, their baptism and entry into communion, cases requiring church discipline, and so on. The house conferences of the individual stations dealt more with practical matters connected with the physical operation of the mission: travels of the missionaries, food supplies, construction and repair of buildings, and the apportionment of household duties among the various Brothers.

Until 1926 the Moravian missionaries, under the direction of the Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel, operated trading stores in their settlements, striving to make their mission as self-supporting as possible. The Moravian records thus include much material bearing upon the trade and commerce of the coast. A great deal of information may be gleaned from the annual lists of goods required from Europe for the various mission households and trading stores. Similarly there are annual lists of the produce of Labrador shipped to London each fall. These lists are supplemented by invoices and bills of lading. We have for some posts inventory books itemizing the goods on hand and the goods to be ordered. Other account books list the goods (like sugar, coffee, butter, wine, and rum) supplied to the Brothers and Sisters individually. The business books also contain the prices paid for goods and the current wage rates for native labor.

Other records from the Moravian archives in Labrador range from descriptions of the lives and journeys of early missionaries to originals and copies of letters and other documents exchanged between the missionaries and governmental authorities. There are present copies of the British Order in Council of 1769 (and following Orders in Council), granting the Moravians land for settlements on the coast. With them are copies of proclamations in which Governors of Newfoundland afforded their protection to the mis-

sionary enterprise. Among the most interesting of the official documents are copies of proclamations issued by the King of France and by Benjamin Franklin granting safe conduct to the mission vessel for its annual passage to the Coast of Labrador during the War of the American Revolution. A manuscript dated 1770 recounts the explorations in that year of the advance party sent out to select a site for the first mission station. The great pioneer missionary Jens Haven compiled in 1780 a book of instructions for the missionaries to follow in dealings with the Eskimos. Another missionary filled a volume with weather observations made over a period of years at Hopedale; still another wrote down medical prescriptions or "recipes" suitable for use in Labrador.

The missionaries preserved a great many handwritten copies of periodicals issued by the church in Germany. Files of the "Parish News" and the "Weekly News," containing much information about church activities in general and missions operations in particular, cover the years from 1779 to 1859. There is also a collection of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century printed and handwritten books containing sermons and speeches of Moravian leaders and other Brethren, as well as proclamations and proceedings of church synods held in Europe.

Included with the Moravian records are books in Eskimo, which testify to the industry displayed by the missionaries in mastering the language and using it in their work. There are early handwritten Eskimo dictionaries and grammars and translations into Eskimo of books of the Bible, Bible stories, geographies, and other school books. Samuel Kleinschmidt, an authority on the Eskimo language who was stationed at Godthaab in Greenland, discussed problems of the language in a series of letters to Theodore Bourquin, the Superintendent in Labrador in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Especially interesting are the letters written to the Eskimo community in Labrador from Moravian mission stations outside Labrador, thanking the Eskimos for their contributions to the work being carried on in such places as Dutch Guiana and South Africa. Most of these letters were probably originally written in German or English and were later translated into Eskimo.

The Moravian missionaries in Labrador, besides being missionaries, have had to be in their time doctors, traders, schoolteachers, journalists, justices of the peace, constables, and civil servants. Their records provide a comprehensive view of many aspects of life in northern Labrador over a period of almost two centuries.