

INVENTING MINA BENSON HUBBARD: FROM HER 1905 EXPEDITION ACROSS LABRADOR TO HER 2005 CENTENNIAL (AND BEYOND)

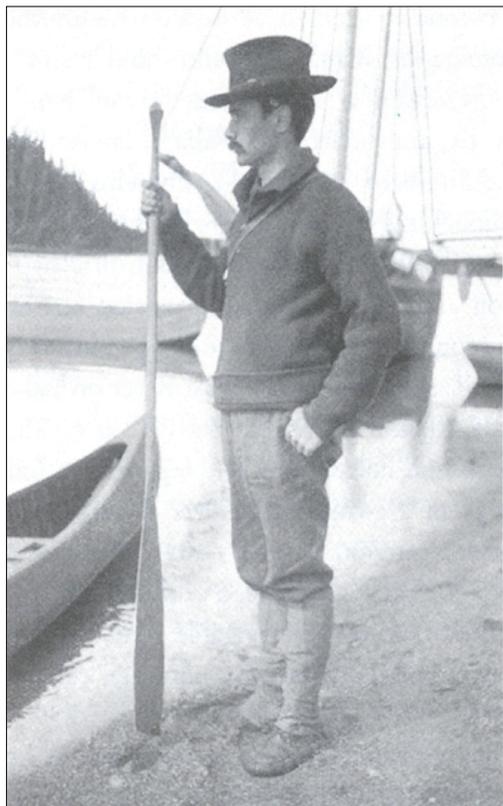
Sherrill Grace

In November 1905, Mina Benson Hubbard recorded in her expedition diary that she had “accomplished all that [she] started for.”¹ But she had not quite accomplished everything she wanted to do, and the expedition she had successfully completed would never leave her mind; it had changed her, made her over from a genteel wife and widow into an explorer and an author. Even before she began her journey, Mina (as I call her now after my long association with her) knew she wanted to make maps, take photographs, and write a book. She started her book while still in Labrador waiting for the supply ship that would take her back to civilization, and as she confided to her diary on August 31st, 1905: “Writing to-day. Slow. Hard to decide what to write about. . . . wish I knew a bit better what public is interested in.”

I have begun my discussion with these brief snippets of Mina *speaking* privately in her own voice because this is about as close as we can now get to the woman who lived at the turn of the last century. When I began my work to prepare a new edition of her 1908 classic, *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador*, I knew I wanted to do my best to recover this woman, but I also quickly realized that the task was impossible and that what I would actually end up doing was to *invent* a person I call *my Mina*. But before I say more about this process of invention, I must provide some biographical background about the woman and her expedition and some factual information about Labrador. Mina Benson was born in 1870 into a comfortable Irish Protestant family in southern Ontario, Canada. She grew up on the family farm with her seven siblings, and as a young woman she had already developed an appreciation for the outdoors and a strong sense of independence. She left Canada for New York City to train as a nurse, a move that was not *common* for women of her class and period;

¹ All quotations from dated entries in the journal that Mina kept during her voyage can be read in Roberta Buchanan's transcription published in *The Woman Who Mapped Labrador*; see Hart, Buchanan, and Greene.

however, nursing was, like teaching, an acceptable profession for an unmarried woman. It was there that she met her first husband, Leonidas Hubbard, Jr. Both she and Leonidas enjoyed canoeing and camping, recreation activities that were becoming popular at the time, but Leonidas had more ambitious plans. He had decided to lead an expedition into one of the last unknown, unmapped, and unphotographed areas of North America—the vast interior, northern territory of Labrador—so that he could write about his adventure.



1. Leonidas Hubbard, Jr. on the shore of Grand Lake at Northwest River, Labrador, July 1903, prior to embarking on his ill-fated expedition.

Sadly, he starved to death on his 1903 expedition, which was a miserable failure in many ways, and only his intrepid guide, George Elson, made it to the nearest settlement for help and was able to save himself and the third man on the expedition, Dillon Wallace. Mina and Leonidas had only been married for a few years; they were deeply in love; and she was left behind waiting for news that took many months to reach her. When it did, she was devastated by her husband's death. To make matters worse, Dillon Wallace quickly published his account of the expedition, but Mina was outraged by

his portrayal of her beloved Laddie and immediately decided to mount her own expedition—the second Hubbard Expedition—so she could complete his work and rescue his reputation.² However, her husband's family was violently opposed to her plans; Wallace, who also planned a second expedition, was hostile; and as soon as the press of the day learned about her expedition they went berserk—but I will get to these early 20th century papparozzi in due course.

² For a discussion of Wallace and of Mina's plans, see my introduction to *A Woman's Way*, Hart's biography, and Johnstone's analysis of Wallace's American ideology.

Mina hired George Elson, who was of Cree/Scots descent, to be her chief guide and together with three experienced native men they left the tiny fur-trading post of Northwest River, Labrador, in June 1905 to make the six-hundred-mile trip through the interior and north to the George River post on Ungava Bay. This well educated, white, middle-class, very attractive widow of thirty-five, set out alone, with four non-white men, on a journey that would take her far away from all the watchful eyes, constraints, prejudices, and taboos of her society. She would be out of sight (notably by white eyes) for almost seven weeks. However, the Mina Benson Hubbard—elegant, lady-like, demur—as she was depicted in the 1907 portrait by Joseph Syddall (see Illus. 2), was the same person as the happy, free, active woman who strides towards the camera on her Labrador trail in the summer of 1905 (see Illus. 3). Both images were reproduced in her book, and when I reflect on these two images I wonder who the real Mina was and how the free spirit on her Labrador trail managed to squeeze herself back into the corseted, decorous lady. It was reflecting on such apparent contradictions that caused me to start thinking about the concept of invention because the quick answer to my question—who was the real Mina?—is that there were several Minas and that she herself discovered, or invented, some of them during her expedition. The process of invention had begun well before her book appeared in 1908.



2. This formal portrait of Mina Benson Hubbard was created by British artist Joseph Syddall in 1907 and used as the frontispiece in the Murray edition of *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador*. Murray also used Syddall's picture of Mina in marketing brochures for the book, thus 'selling' her as a lady and her expedition and book as respectable.

Today Labrador is an official part of Newfoundland, the last province to join Canada in 1949, but at the end of the 19th century it

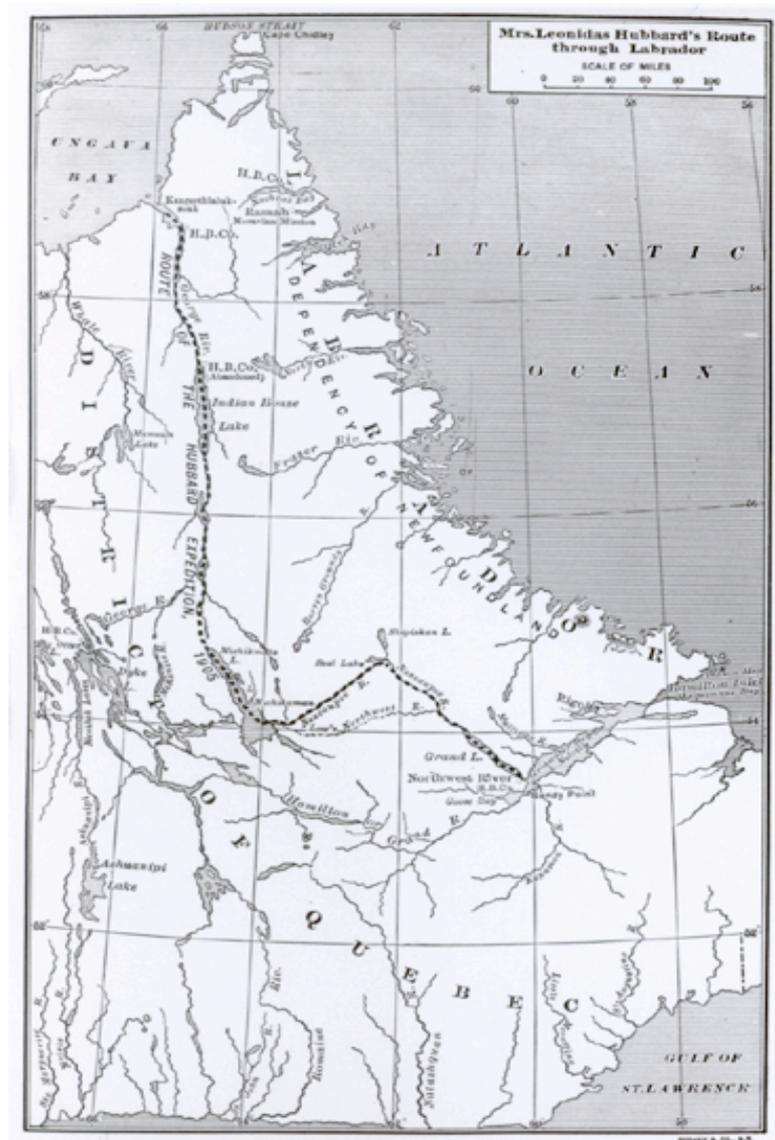
was remote indeed, part of the British Empire, and serviced—minimally—by the British supply ship *Pelican* which made one annual summer visit to the coast and as far into Hudson Bay as Ungava. The Montagnais and Naskapi First Nations, now known collectively as the Innu, were virtually untouched by white civilization, and the interior of Labrador had been incompletely, and inaccurately, mapped by Arthur Low of the Geological Survey of Canada. In the racist rhetoric of the day—a rhetoric subscribed to by most northern explorers but not by Mina—these tribes and their way of life were objects of curiosity, the stuff upon which to make a reputation, stone age people for white men from the south to *discover*. One of the key reasons for the failure of



3. This photograph of Mina on the trail in Labrador in the summer of 1905 was almost certainly taken by George Elson. Mina included it in her book.

Leonidas's 1903 expedition was the map; he could only rely on Low's partial and inaccurate cartography and he took the wrong water route. Among the other reasons for his failure and death were his lack of appropriate supplies and gear, an early winter, and an unwillingness to listen to the advice of his non-white guide George Elson. Mina made none of these mistakes. She set out, as Leonidas had done (and as Dillon Wallace was doing again at exactly the same time, in June 1905), from the Northwest River post, she found the correct

river route up the Naskapi River to Lake Michikimau and then north on the George River to Ungava (see Illus. 4).



4. Mina published this version of her map of Labrador with one of her articles. On it she indicates her correct route running north of A.P. Low's mistaken mapping of the river.

As she went, she took the measurements that enabled her to redraw the map of the Labrador interior; she took hundreds of photographs of the country, its native people, her guides, for whom she had the utmost respect, and their expedition work; and she wrote almost daily in her journal. She did not have to do any of the heavy, dangerous work of poling, packing on portages, or paddling, but after her return *unknown* Labrador was unknown no longer. Contemporary maps of Labrador and Atlantic Canada provide some sense of how the area looks now (see Hart et al); however, a mere map cannot capture the

significant changes that have been made from the time of WW II to the present by white settlers, developers, and politicians.

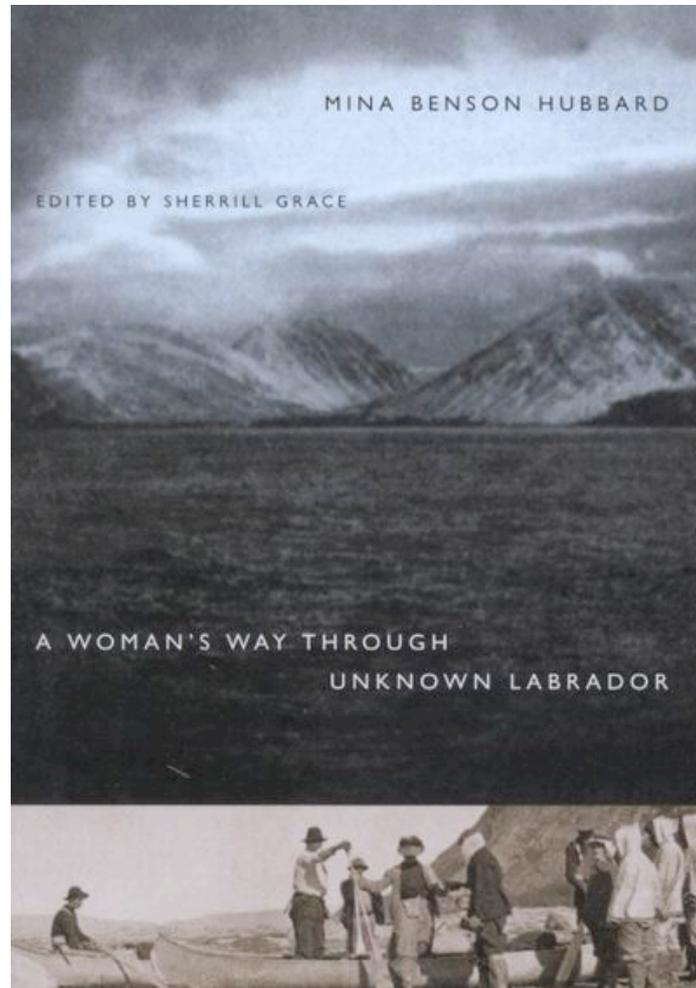
Mina would go on inventing herself after her return from Labrador by giving public lectures, writing essays—scientific and popular—and publishing her book. She remarried in England, raised three children and worked for the suffragette movement; she returned to Canada frequently and once, in her sixties, traveled north for a reunion with George Elson. Labrador had become part of her, as the announcement for a 1938 lecture indicates: the lecture, given at today's University of Guelph was part of a tour she undertook that year and she is described in the advertising as a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and as the successful explorer of Labrador (see Hart, 411). According to her children, she was an austere presence who would regularly set forth on long walks by announcing that she was going off to explore, and it was on the last of these explorations that she was struck and killed by a train, not far from her home in England, at age eighty-six. Today a commemorative plaque has been erected beside the road in front of the original Ontario farmstead where she was born and grew up, but that is only one visible reminder of who she was.

Just trying to summarize Mina's life-story and her connection with Labrador reminds me forcibly of how invented my version is—I have left out so much, selected what I see as important, and emphasized what interests me. In order to prepare my edition of her book, I found it necessary to recreate, as best I could, her time and her place, to listen to her voice in her expedition diary and in those few letters that survive. But I could not transform myself into an Edwardian woman, and Mina Benson Hubbard should not be viewed exclusively—or uncritically—through my late-20th century/early 21st-century feminist eyes. As I have continued to discover from my work on Mina, my book on Canadian painter Tom Thomson—called *Inventing Tom Thomson*—and now through my writing of the biography of a contemporary Canadian playwright, *Making Theatre: A Life of Sharon Pollock*, the very act of narrating a life-story, however scholarly and factual, is a **re-creation**; it is never and cannot be an **ur-text**, an original, the Truth. Moreover, when a continuous line of such narratives begins to emerge around a once-living, historical figure, the story becomes more and more sedimented in layers of interpretation,

more complicated by the story-tellers' self-legitimizing strategies and truth claims. And the subject of all this narration—the person who motivated or inspired the story in the first place—becomes larger than and other than him- or herself. The person becomes a symbol, or a legend, or a myth, or, as I prefer to think of it—an icon.

As I argued in *Canada and the Idea of North*, over time and with a critical mass of repetition, a discourse emerges around a particular person or event or place, which thereby becomes invested with crucial meaning for a family, for a group of people, or even for a nation: this one story accrues significance; it comes to stand for something much larger than one life or one accomplishment (or death, or sacrifice, etc). I well remember being challenged about this term “invention” when I used it in a lecture on Tom Thomson. My audience was from Owen Sound, Ontario, Thomson's home town; we were in the Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery (where a very definite investment in his story existed), and my listener felt the term invention sounded pejorative. I think he felt that I was fiddling with the facts, making up stuff, lying, and I know he believed that only one story about the famous painter could be true. But I see nothing pejorative in the term invention; to the contrary, I see much greater ideological, psychological, and possibly even political power residing in the inventing process than in a set of bare facts. What interests me is how this process works, how I can locate and describe it (with what scholarly tools and theoretical concepts), and what meanings a particular iconic invention produces. In the following discussion I will describe how and why I think this woman called Mina Benson Hubbard, or Mrs Leonidas Hubbard, Jr., or Mrs Mina Ellis (her second husband's name) is becoming a Canadian icon through her many, and on-going, inventions. In Canada, and in this case of Mina, there are three critical determinants at work: first, the basic story concerns *the North*, a vaguely defined, real yet mythical place of enormous symbolic and practical value to the country, and a place very much in the public eye today; second, the central figure in the story is a woman on an expedition into a part of the north that remains foreign, mysterious, even exotic to the great majority of Canadians; and third, the verifiable facts of the story include a tragic death, a love story, and a survivor story. Just summarized like this—mysterious North, dangerous expedition, young woman, tragic death, faithful love, all set in 1905—would make

a person eager to know when the film will be made, and it so happens that one film has already appeared and at least two others are underway.³ The inventing of Mina Benson Hubbard is rapidly becoming cultural business.



5. This striking jacket was designed by David Drummond for the 2004 edition of Mina's book. McGill-Queen's University Press included all Mina's illustrations and a full, fold-out reproduction of her map, which is glued into the binding and can be opened out for readers to follow her trail as they read her text.

³ "Mina et Hubbard," the tele-film about Mina, is part of the *Canada en Amour* series produced for Radio Canada by Vic Pelletier and it was aired in April 2007. This film, part documentary and part dramatic recreation of Mina's story involves sequences taken when the film crew camped, canoed, and filmed along the George River, and in the evenings the young woman member of the crew is filmed reading Mina's book. This combination of documentary, interviews, and drama underscores the relevance of Mina's story and the northern landscape for contemporary audiences. Anne Henderson is making a documentary film about Mina and she was on location in Labrador during the 2005 centennial. Jean Desormeaux of Coolbrook Productions in Ontario has created a script for a film about Mina's life that promises to be an interesting dramatic reconstruction of her expedition and her relationship to Leonidas and to Labrador.

In 2004 my new edition of Mina's *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador* was published and my publisher, McGill-Queen's University Press, or rather their designer, captured and capitalized upon many of the discursive elements I have mentioned to market the book (see Illus. 5): there is the romantic, mysterious, beautiful yet overpowering northern landscape; there is the woman stepping out of her canoe, out of another time and place, and into our 21st century sights. Before a reader even opens the book, Mina has already been *placed* in a set of concentric and overlapping paradigms that resonate hugely for Canadians and others who love the North. But there is an important caveat to make about this dust jacket image because readers/buyers are being tricked by the woman whose arrival at Ungava appears to be captured on camera. The photograph at the bottom of the dust jacket was staged. When Mina actually arrived at the end of her expedition, on the mudflats of the George River, no one was waiting with a camera. The factor, Mr Ford, and his wife, had heard vague rumours that she might be making this expedition, but they had no positive information—there were no telephones, cell phones, Blackberries, or couriers in 1905, and the interior of Labrador was just that—interior, uncharted (for white people) territory. What's more, Mina had made excellent time and arrived days before she could have been expected. But she knew that to prove her arrival she would need a record of it; she also knew full well that no man would believe a woman could possibly complete such an expedition, unless there was visual proof of the fact, and that no white man would take a native man's word on it. Wisely, she arranged this photograph and the people in it so posterity could see her stepping daintily out of her canoe, always already a lady despite her suspicious, salacious time in the wilds.

She was manipulating and inventing her image of course, but she had reason to do so. Before she had escaped into Labrador on this expedition, the press had caught up with her and the speculations, gossip, and aspersions made headlines. As I carried out my research for the edition, I explored dozens of newspapers of the day, tracking down items and tracing the story presented by reporters; comments like these are representative of what I found: "Mrs Hubbard Suspicious," her "strange visit" (not expedition) to Labrador is "sentimentally inspired," and Mina herself is described as "jealous,"

“secretive,” and “a small, frail woman.”⁴ These quotations illustrate a few of the more common epithets, and through this research I could get in touch with her contemporary milieu and gain insight into the ways in which a woman leading a northern expedition in 1905 would be viewed and constructed in the popular, southern imagination. These insights, in turn, helped me to appreciate many of the choices and decisions she made, not least to keep her expedition a secret for as long as possible. Feminist theories and history also guided my thinking on these issues, as did my research into what Mina might have read. After all, she was a trained nurse and although that training definitely inculcated good practices of observation and note-taking, it did not provide her with narrative templates for a northern expedition. For that her models had to be male ones. However, when I began the process of comparative analysis with male expedition narratives I was struck by the differences as much as the similarities with *A Woman's Way*. I have described these in detail in my introduction to the edition, therefore, I will just mention two differences in passing: first, in her narrative, she adopts an inclusive and multiple—what Bakhtin would call a dialogic—voice by interspersing her story with the stories of her dead husband and her guides (a narrative privileging unheard of in men's narratives of the time); second, her photographs, while many are clearly taken with the expeditionary goal in mind, are remarkable for the care and attention she devotes to her guides, their work and individual identities, and to the native peoples she meets. What I was trying to do—and I think we must all make this attempt when we try to work with northern materials from an earlier period, perhaps especially when a woman is at the centre of the story—was to avoid as much as possible forcing my views onto the text or event. We must try to listen, with historically and theoretically sensitive ears, to the voices in the text or story, and we must keep the geographical, social, and political contexts of an expedition like Mina's as clearly before us as possible. And yet, with the best will in the world we will still inevitably produce an invention.

⁴ For a full discussion of the newspaper reaction to Mina's expedition, see my introduction to *A Woman's Way* (xxiii-xxx); a complete list of the sources consulted is provided in my bibliography.

Thus far I have focused on the context and background for this expedition, but I was working with a book that I wanted to bring back into print. No manuscripts appear to have survived. The plates of her hundreds of photographs have disappeared (something that has not happened with male explorers of the day). Where to begin? The archival challenges were considerable, but her original expedition journal did survive and was in the collection at Memorial University in Newfoundland, with a complete photocopy deposited in the National Archives in Ottawa. I have studied both and own a complete copy for research purposes. One of the most arduous but fascinating aspects of my research involved a careful reading—often a deciphering—of the journal and then a detailed comparison with her published text. What I learned through this work would require another article, so I cannot delve into the matter here. But I was very fortunate to have such a resource because it brought me a bit closer to the private woman, revealed her writing ability—which was considerable—and convinced me once and for all that Mina adored her dead husband and had no romantic interest in her handsome guide George Elson—oh yes, that is part of the inventing that continues to this day! It also assured me of her courage and endurance because not even in the privacy of this journal did she whine or complain about the hardships of her expedition—the voracious flies, the dangerous rapids, the paucity of clean clothes or feminine supplies of any kind (including a mirror). Her journal contains long passages of praise for the men and quotations of their conversation—when these were in English. Her chief frustration lay in the extreme care that Elson and the men took of her; they balked at her requests to roam freely or to photograph rapids because, as she came to realize, they were terrified that she would fall or come to harm, in which case they would be accused of the most evil behaviour and, as George told her on one occasion, then *they* would never be able to return to their homes. In other words, comparing the journal with the final text reveals a great deal about what she learned, about how she adapted to rough northern conditions and was changed by her experience, and about what it came to mean to her. At one point in the journal she writes that she never wanted to go back to civilization and that if she were only a man she would stay in the North. This comment, however, does not make its way into the published book.

When Mina returned south, she gave interviews and slide lectures and published articles about her expedition. Nevertheless, male opinion proved intransigent: one man, a clergyman who spoke with great authority, assured the public that she could not have done what she claimed in the time she had taken. Dillon Wallace was attempting the journey at the same time as Mina and he took several weeks longer to reach Ungava, suffered many near fatal accidents, and was obliged to send half of his expedition back at the mid-point. If Wallace had this difficulty, Mrs Hubbard was nothing short of a liar, or so this gentleman implied. When her accomplishments became irrefutable, male commentators and book reviewers dismissed her expedition as little more than a pleasant canoe trip on which she did no real work. Finally, she was displaced as the leader of a northern expedition and credit for her success was given to George Elson.

In coping with these contemporary—and more recent—disparagements, I have kept the following points in mind: no one who has hiked across northern tundra and taiga can honestly claim that there is no work involved; I have done a little of this and I would not have lasted a week with Mina. No one who has canoed on the waters of rivers like the Naskapi and the George can claim that this is a pleasant wilderness paddle. True, Mina did not do the heavy work of poling, portaging supplies, and making camp each night, but white men also expected their native guides to do a great deal of this manual labour for them so they could take measurements, keep their journals or, indeed, draw pictures of the local fauna and flora as, for example, the gentlemen on Sir John Franklin's first two expeditions into the Canadian North did. Finally, the fact that Mina listened closely to George's advice (and he was indeed a very brave, knowledgeable, and loyal man), appreciated his and the other men's expertise, and was prepared to trust them in no way diminishes her role as expedition leader (at least not to my mind). Her husband's expedition failed in large part because he and Wallace dismissed George's warnings as mere Indian superstition; Leonidas stubbornly insisted that he knew what to do, and he was terribly wrong. But I believe what really annoyed many of the men in the American and British Geographical societies and in the general public was her map. With this map she corrected the mistakes made by the distinguished A.P. Low, proved that her husband had been misled by Low's map, and made an

impressively accurate cartographical representation of the Labrador interior. Even today, geographers, like Brian Greene, who can use highly sophisticated technology in their work, will allow that her map was first rate for its time and for the minimal equipment at her disposal. Here is where her training as a nurse, in the close observation of physical facts, stood her in good stead.

A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador was published by John Murray, one of the leading expedition publishers of the day, in 1908, and it was handsomely produced and strategically marketed; her splendid map was included with the book and folded into a pocket sewn into the inside back binding. Mrs Hubbard, as she was always called, was marketed as a *lady* explorer, which her portrait confirms, and her adventure was sanctioned by virtue of her stated mission of completing her late husband's work; the mysterious North was exoticised for British readers; and her practical accomplishments were placed within these familiar boundaries. William Briggs published the Canadian edition later in 1908 using the Murray text and map. However, when the New York publisher McClure published her book in 1909, they cut the map, reduced the photographs, dropped the important endorsement provided by William Cabot (an explorer who knew parts of Labrador) and made numerous small, unauthorized, textual changes to insert sexual innuendos and to heighten sensational aspects of a woman traveling alone with "red men" (see Roy). In other words, for the American market, the book was made less visually attractive, the accomplishments of its author were diminished, and the woman herself was cast in a morally dubious light.

With the outbreak of WW II, sales of *A Woman's Way* stopped and the book went out of print. Outside the tiny community of Northwest River, Labrador, Mina Benson Hubbard was forgotten for several decades. But when attention began to refocus on the 1903 tragedy of the first Hubbard expedition in the 1980s with Davidson and Ruge's book *Great Heart: The History of Labrador Adventure* (the epithet "great heart," by the way, was Mina's name, borrowed from *Pilgrim's Progress*, for George), Mina once more entered the stage, albeit in a very minor role as the pathetic widow, as the stubborn and secretive competitor to Dillon Wallace, or as the older woman out to seduce the handsome George. Other writers to invent Mina have been

Margaret Atwood, Pierre Berton, Clayton Klein (his Mina is a sex-starved widow, and he passes off fictional letters as real ones), the feminist canoeists Carol Iwata and Judith Niemi, who *did* the George River in the early 1980s, Lynn Noel, who romanticized Mina as a type of Pauline Johnson paddling her own canoe, in a 1999 song collection called *A Woman's Way, Songs and True Stories of Northern Women Explorers*, and the British journalist Alexandra Pratt who attempted to repeat Mina's expedition with an Innu guide in 2000, but failed and had to be air lifted out. She published her book, *Lost Lands, Forgotten Stories: A Woman's Journey to the Heart of Labrador* in 2002. Despite their differences in perspective and invention, from difficult widow to sexist thriller to feminist celebration to faithful follower-in-the-steps-of-who-tries-to-repeat-Mina's-journey, *all these inventions*, like the most recent ones—mine, biographer Anne Hart's, and Randall Silvis's 2004 non-fiction version *Heart So Hungry*—are by southerners, those whom Labradorians and Newfoundlanders label as "from away," American, British, and Canadian. However, in 2005 that changed. On the centenary of her expedition, the tiny community of Northwest River (population 500), assisted by Memorial University's Centre for Labrador Studies, hosted the Mina Benson Hubbard Centennial (see Illus. 6). Many of us from away were invited guests, but finally the northerners were going to get to tell their stories about Leonidas, Mina, Wallace, George, and their own ancestors who had rescued the 1903 survivors or who had been on Mina's expedition. It is to these people and their inventions that I want to turn now.

First, I must stress the fact that Mina Hubbard is a legendary figure, along with the men—George, Leonidas, and Wallace—amongst the "Liveyers" (mixed race settlers, not Innu) of Northwest, but she is especially cherished because they see her as having respected them in ways that the white men from away rarely did. They also cherish her because of the sensitive ways in which she responded to their beloved Labrador.⁵ And like human beings

⁵ During my visit to Northwest River, I was impressed with the strong sense of community identity and pride evident amongst both the settler and indigenous populations. Many of the Liveyers spoke eagerly about their memories of Mina and their views about her character and place in their history. They were welcoming to those of us from away but they were also patiently sceptical about our ability to understand Labrador or to appreciate the full significance of their history.

anywhere, although with what I see as more generosity of spirit, they have to this day a great sympathy for her personal tragedy, her courage, and her tenacity; for many of them, Mina's story is a love story—about *her* dear Laddie and about *their* northern home.

MINA HUBBARD CENTENNIAL
North West River
Labrador, NL, Canada
1905 - 2005

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Preliminary Schedule

- Opening Ceremonies June 26th
- Symposium – Labrador Adventure June 27th – 30th
- Re-enactment at the River June 27th
- Beach Festival July 23rd & 24th
- Come Home Year July 26th - 30th
- Labrador Canoe Regatta July 30th – August 01st
- Departure Re-enactment #2 July 26th
- Women's Wilderness Retreat July 14th – 17th
- Women's Wilderness Retreat (2) August 11th – 14th
- Closing Ceremonies August 27th

In 1905 Mina Hubbard would make the trek through Labrador using the same route as her late husband planned to use in the ill fated 1903 Expedition.
This adventurous woman set out to travel an uncharted region of Labrador, motivated by the desire to protect the name and reputation of her late husband, Leonidas Hubbard.
In 2005 a series of events, in North West River, Labrador, will commemorate this remarkable adventure.
Come Celebrate with us this Summer in Central Labrador's Oldest Community.

MINA HUBBARD 1905
2005 100th ANNIVERSARY

The Route of 1905

COME JOIN THE ADVENTURE!!!

Visit Us Online At: www.mina2005.ca

6. The 2005 centennial celebration was organized by the people of Northwest River, and a display about her expedition is housed in the former Hudson Bay trading post that now serves as the region's museum.

The centennial of June 2005 had four main components: a conference on Labrador exploration; a re-enactment of Mina's expedition setting forth (see Illus 7); an original play by Northwest's resident writer, June Baikie, and a film: everything done in the re-enactment was being filmed as it happened, visitors and locals were being interviewed during our few days there, and the film crew took considerable footage of the Grand River, the community, and the surroundings. Some of us were also flown—by the local airplane company—over the rivers that feature so dramatically in Leonidas's death and Mina's success.



7. The opening event of the 2005 conference was a re-enactment of Mina's embarking on her expedition from the shore in front of the Hudson Bay trading post in Northwest River. Local townsfolk dressed in period costume and gathered on the beach to watch as members of the community, playing the roles of their forebears, loaded the canoes in preparation. Martha MacDonald played Mina. Others in the crowd were, like myself, invited conference guests who performed as witnesses.

Many, many things impressed me during this northern adventure, my first to Labrador, but the one I found most moving was the staging, in

the local community hall, of Baikie's play "Mina Song" (see Illus. 8). Perhaps because I am an English professor who teaches drama; perhaps because Mina's grandsons were also in attendance; perhaps because descendants of those people who had known Mina were performing in the play; perhaps because Baikie's invention of Mina resonated with my own; and perhaps because I finally sensed that I had come very close indeed to something emotionally true and symbolically important by *witnessing* this production, perhaps for all these reasons together, it was the play that made the biggest impact on me. This was no professional theatre event, but it was valid and genuinely local.

MINA HUBBARD CENTENNIAL
North West River
Labrador, NL, Canada 1905 - 2005

The Mina Hubbard Centennial
and Becky Bowers
Present

Mina's Song

By June Baikie

June 28th, 2005
Beginning at 7:00 p.m.
North West River Community Centre, Postage Road
Price: \$25.00 per person

8. This program is for June Baikie's play "Mina's Song," which premiered in the local community centre in June 2007. The play has gone on to have two further productions.

Attending it was a form of field work, for a literary scholar, because I was watching northerners take ownership—which they had never doubted they always had—of their own story (see Grace 2006). Here was a community performing its own myth, living what Pierre Nora calls a *lieux de mémoire*. No one from away could do this.

Of course, I am aware of the problematic status of the riverside re-enactment with Martha MacDonald playing Mina and I acknowledge the *virtual* nature of this representation, just as I recognize the wonderfully imaginative creation of Baikie's Mina. And I shall be fascinated to see what the filmmaker, Ann Henderson, does with all the footage her cameramen got of the re-enactment, the conference itself, and of the participants whom she interviewed. Nevertheless, the play stands out for me because in it Baikie stayed close to the known facts of Mina's life and death—even to having a train kill her before her grandsons' eyes—while at the same time making a powerful contribution to the northern discourse of Labrador. *Her* Mina, who adored her Laddie—as the title song indicates—dies because she thinks she is going back to Labrador to explore; her Mina calls out as she steps in front of the train: "I am coming Laddie," coming, that is, into the realm of death but also *home* to the northern landscape in which the historical Mina constantly felt and saw her husband's spirit.

In conclusion, I can offer the following observations. The first, inevitably, concerns my own work on the edition because three-and-a-half years after I had tried to nail down all my annotations to the text, I received confirmation from experts in the Mushuau dialect of the Innu language and their culture that a particular term, *wenastica*, that had defied all my tracking efforts *probably* referred to a food made from the contents of a caribou stomach; this substance was rich in vitamins and was traditionally fed to starving people before more substantial foods could be digested.⁶ The moral of this story is that an

⁶ The word given by Mina, transcribing her dead husband's journal, is "wenastica" (see *A Woman's Way* 186, 250). I am immensely grateful Dr Iain Taylor, Dr Kate Frego, Dr Stephen Clayden, and finally Lorne Hollett, editor of *Them Days*, for almost certainly identifying this mysterious word. An Innu elder, Peter Armitage, thinks the word is an Anglicization of the Mushuau word "Uinashtakai" which, when said aloud, could sound like *wenastica*. The term refers to a soup made from the contents of the caribou stomach mixed with the animal's blood, returned to the stomach, tied off and allowed to dry into a cake-like substance resembling a blood pudding. When boiling water is added with a

editor's work is never done, that white southerners adopt native words without naming their source and that only northerners—in the case of this word and text—can unravel the mystery, and that it is usually impossible to get back through time and language to Truth. Fortunately, a paperback edition of Mina's book is now underway and I shall be able to add this tiny piece of information. My second observation is that my edition, like my original lecture and now this article, are part of a discursive formation about the North and, more particularly, about a woman's place in the narrative of northern exploration. By telling her story and by putting her book back into circulation, I have re-inserted her, that is, *my invention of her*, into this continuous narrative. My next observation is that Mina has become what I call an iconic figure within the Canadian imaginary. She stands for female success against the most challenging odds, not of the land but of public opinion; she has been transformed into a metaphor for what white southern Canadians see as the dangerous, seductive, beautiful but deadly and temperamental North. As of June 2005, the centennial, the re-enactment and the play, she became a symbol—to the northerners, the "Liveyers" of Labrador—of home and of qualities they value highly: reverence for the land, respect for elders, especially native elders, conjugal love and fidelity, courage without complaint, survival, and community. However, with the April 2007 television broadcast of the film "Mina et Hubbard: L'amour qui fait voyager," those qualities of female success and love of the northern landscape have been extended beyond Labrador to the entire nation: Mina's story becomes a story about "Canada en amour."

Finally, I can say with conviction, that my work, like the work of Mina's biographer Anne Hart, whose book was launched at the centennial, has added layers to the invention of Mina as smart, feisty, successful, passionately devoted to Canada, its North, and to her own self-discovery as an explorer. She was a woman of her time in many ways, but she was also ahead of her time, and this contributes to her lasting appeal. Almost one hundred years ago, in her review of *A Woman's Way*, Jean Graham expressed the hope that the "Canadian public may someday honour a woman whose claim to recognition

bit of lard, a soup is made that is gentle and nourishing for a starving human being. The context for Leonidas Hubbard's use of the word suggests that he is in fact speaking of this substance.

rests on pluck and brains" (471). And we have honoured her, albeit *not* by recounting the expedition facts because her map has been superseded, the landscape she travelled has been altered irrevocably, overgrown with dense brush, flooded to build hydro-electric dams, and over-flown by military aircraft, and the Innu people have been forced into unhealthy settlements. We honour her by continuing to tell her story, by imagining ourselves following in her footsteps, by inventing her as something of a northern icon striding down her Labrador trail, over the hills, and on to the beckoning waters of an imagined Lake Michickamau.

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