

William Brooks Cabot (1858-1949)

Between 1899 and 1924, Indian hunters in the Quebec-Labrador peninsula regularly encountered a tattered gentleman from Boston, Massachusetts, wandering about their country. A pre-eminent engineer of his day, William Brooks Cabot built aqueducts in New York, bridges across the Connecticut and the Charles, and subway tunnels under New York City, but for more than 20 years his passion for northern travel could not be assuaged, and he made annual pilgrimages into the remote regions of the far northeast.

Cabot grew up in the central Connecticut River valley, having been born into a prosperous banking family in Brattleboro, Vermont. It was on the Connecticut that Cabot honed his camping skills and wilderness appetite; it pulled his imagination



Cabot, wearing a painted Naskapi caribou-skin coat, Labrador, 1903.

north toward Canada and led him as a young man to explore the lakes at its source.

The beginning of what Cabot called his travels in the "Indian North" came during the winter of 1899, when he made a long overland trek from Lac Saint-Jean to the Hudson's Bay Company post at Mistassini. He was accompanied on the journey by two Indian companions, one of whom — John Bastian — had previously crisscrossed the Labrador peninsula in the service of A.P. Low, of the Geological Survey of Canada.

It was from Bastian that Cabot heard at first hand tales of the Labrador plateau: a land of immense lakes and uncharted rivers, where vast herds of caribou roamed and where a shadowy, little-known group of Indians still lived for the most part beyond the ken of European eyes. Cabot's life-long fascination with wilderness travel and with Indians, which had smoldered while he erected his professional career, was reignited. With the avowed goal of learning the language and the way of life of the region's small bands of Indian hunters, he spent eight summers (1903-1910) in northern Labrador among the Naskapi (or, as they prefer to be called today, the Innu), five summers (1913, 1915-1917, 1920) along the Quebec North Shore with Indians who traded out of the St. Augustin post, three summers (1921, 1923, 1924) with Indian families who traded at Northwest River in Hamilton Inlet, and winter cross-country trips in the Chamouchouane-Mistassini region in 1899, 1902, 1905, 1909, 1910, and 1913.

In 1903 Cabot travelled to Labrador with the intention of intercepting the Naskapi Indians when they came out to trade at the Hudson's Bay Company post at Davis Inlet. Cabot shared the voyage north from Newfoundland with Leonidas Hubbard, who was planning to explore the interior of Labrador and descend the George River to Ungava Bay. Hoping to benefit from the older man's experiences, Hubbard urged Cabot to join his party. Intrigued by the offer, Cabot nevertheless declined, having set his sights on finding the Naskapi on the coast. Unprepared and overbold, Hubbard's party plunged into the Labrador wilderness, where they went astray and where Hubbard eventually succumbed to starvation and exposure.

Cabot's own trip was far more propitious. He was successful in meeting with the Naskapi hunters at Davis Inlet, and although unable to accompany them back into the interior, the visit provided the foundation for subsequent encounters. In 1904 and 1905, Cabot renewed his contact with the Naskapi, who encouraged him to come inland with them. In 1906, having worked out a river and portage route onto the Labrador plateau, Cabot reached Lake Mistinibi, where he met with a small Naskapi band camped at a caribou crossing. During the preceding two weeks the hunters had speared almost 1500 caribou as they swam across the narrows.

Cabot's last trip to northern Labrador was in 1910. Breaking from his tradition of travelling alone, or with a single companion, Cabot brought a party of four men across the Labrador plateau to the large Naskapi camp at Tshinutivish on Indian House Lake. The Naskapi were disturbed with this sudden invasion; nonetheless, the party was housed for the night and fed. On the return journey to the coast, Cabot found that a cache he had established on his way inland had been burned by a party of Indians. This was a crushing and unexpected rebuttal from



Ostinitsu, a Naskapi man, stirring a broth of crushed caribou bones, Mistinibi, 1906. Both photos are from the William Brooks Cabot collection, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

the people Cabot had worked hard to befriend. The Naskapi motives for destroying Cabot's cache are not clear, but it is apparent that they never completely understood his reasons for coming into their country or the sudden expansion in the size of his party.

The events of the 1910 trip marked an end to Cabot's excursions in the caribou country of northern Labrador, but his interest in northeastern Indians was unabated. After a hiatus of several years, Cabot shifted his attention to the southeastern corner of the Quebec-Labrador peninsula, where, as was his pattern, he persuaded Indian families to let him accompany them on their summer hunts. Cabot's reputation had preceded him, and he took pleasure in a growing familiarity with the language and customs of his Indian hosts.

During a trip in 1920, from St. Augustin overland to Sandwich Bay on the Labrador coast, he cut his leg severely while chopping wood. After years of "knocking about" in the subarctic wilderness, the accident on the headwaters of the Paradise River, with his life dependent on the resources of his Indian companions, must have figured significantly in his decision to finally curtail his wilderness journeys. There had been a brief sortie in 1918 to Pelican Narrows in northern Saskatchewan, and there were subsequent trips to Northwest River in Hamilton Inlet, but these lacked the rigour of his earlier travels.

Cabot had long sustained an interest in Algonquian languages, manifest both by his publication of Father G. Lemoine's *Dictionnaire Français-Montagnais* (1901) and by a study of New England Indian place names.

Cabot died quietly at his home in Boston a few days short of his 91st birthday. During the course of his life, he had seen the

last of the empty spaces on the maps of the Quebec-Labrador peninsula filled in. His own geographical contributions were relatively minor ones, based in part on the maps he had had his Indian companions draw for him. One of these maps — the original had been over 70 feet long, drawn in the sand of a riverbank by an old Naskapi hunter — was part of the evidence presented in the Labrador Boundary Dispute.

In recognition of his accomplishments, Cabot's name was given to the prominent lake along the Indian route from the George River to the Labrador coast, as well as to the subspecies of caribou from northern Labrador. Cabot was neither geographer, explorer, nor scientist, although he made contributions in all three arenas; rather, he preferred to think of himself as "a minor wanderer," a man with the means to pursue his own intensely personal quest in the North.

FURTHER READINGS

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