

GEORGE CARTWRIGHT'S *THE LABRADOR COMPANION*. Edited by MARIANNE P. STOPP. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0773533820. xxxix + 350 p., maps, b&w illus., appendix, bib., index. US & Cdn\$39.95.

The English merchant-adventurer George Cartwright (1739–1819) was probably the foremost expert on Labrador of his time. Not only did he have an intimate knowledge of Labrador's resources, but he also spent considerable time with its Native people—the Innu, whom he called “Mountaineer Indians,” and the Inuit, whom he referred to as either “Indians” or “Esquimeau Indians.” He wanted these people to realize that the English were a remarkably civilized race and thus would make excellent trading partners, so in 1772 he brought a group of Labrador Inuit to England, a trip he described in his eminently readable journal. Not surprisingly, that trip had a tragic outcome.

Unlike the three-volume journal, which was first published in 1792, the handwritten manuscript of *The Labrador Companion* was passed along from one member of the Cartwright family to another for 200 years and has not been in print until now. More a compendium than a companion, it is an exhaustive account of fur trade technology (note: the fur trade included seal, whale, and fish products, as well as furs). There is not a critter in Labrador that Cartwright doesn't tell the prospective trader how to track, hunt, trap, shoot, cook, cure, fish for, put in a kennel, or otherwise catch. Marianne Stopp of Parks Canada is to be commended both for her role in transcribing the original manuscript and for her comprehensive introduction to it. A quibble: why did she devote 25 pages to entries from *The Labrador Companion* and then provide the reader with the page numbers from Cartwright's original manuscript? Thus the entry for “To jerk Meat” will take you to “Beaver-Trap” and “Marten-Trap” in the book.

In the latter part of the 18th century, Labrador was one of England's most significant resource areas. His earlier journals did not instruct, Cartwright told his friend Sir Joseph Banks, but *The Labrador Companion* does so... emphatically. If you want to know a dead bait for a fox or a marten, the book will provide you with this remarkably exact answer: “Old Cheshire cheese, which is black-rotten; Honey; Treacle; and the Paunch of a Deer. Oil-bag of a beaver; Dried figs and raisins” (p. 79). Perhaps you want to “intoxicate” a bear? You will find out the following information on page 118: “Bears may be intoxicated by mixing either Laudanum or Spirits with Treacle & Water. If overdosed with Laudanum, they will die; but a sufficient quantity of Spirits will make them so drunk, that they may be muzzled, bound, and brought home in a sack and will become sober again.” Or maybe you want to trap beavers? As beavers were an essential part of the fur trade, the book offers nine pages on this subject (p. 139–147).

As Stopp indicates in her introduction, Cartwright's keen interest in natural history is often on display in the book. For instance, he remarks in the section on porcupines:

“So soon as vegetation begins, the Porcupine feeds upon the young leaves of a variety of plants, and is particularly fond of those of the larch tree. They do not get fat until August and begin to grow lean again as soon as the ground is covered with snow; they then being compelled to live on the bark of the Silver Fir, and have no other food through the long and severe Winter” (p. 147). As it happens, silver fir (*Abies alba*) does not grow in Labrador or, indeed, in North America—I wonder if Cartwright might have been referring to balsam fir (*Abies balsamea*)?

Cartwright's comments on natural history are usually quite accurate, however. On p. 115, he mentions that a polar bear “will eat an agaric [probably the birch polypore, *Piptoporus betulinus*], which grows on birch trees.” That polar bears will eat fungi in times of need has only recently been documented. Likewise, Cartwright's corrections of 18th century naturalist Thomas Pennant's (1784a) two volumes of *Arctic Zoology* as well as Pennant's (1784b) *Supplement to the Arctic Zoology* in *The Labrador Companion*'s appendix indicate that he was a better observer of the natural world than Pennant. When the latter states that squirrels “keep in their nests the whole Winter,” Cartwright writes: “No. They are to be seen all the winter, in fine days” (p. 334); and when Pennant observes that caribou dig for lichen with “palmated horns,” Cartwright corrects him by writing “hoofs” (p. 327).

You could say that *The Labrador Companion*, published 200 years after his death, represents Cartwright's afterlife. In fact, there is a 1992 novel by Newfoundland author John Steffler entitled *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*. In that novel, Cartwright's discontented spirit has second thoughts about his plundering of Labrador (“I think now that I should have learned to worship instead of slaughter,” the spirit says). Shift the perspective on *The Labrador Companion*, and the book often seems like a field guide to slaughter. Consider the Eskimo Curlew (*Numenius borealis*), one of the book's numerous avian victims (“Not rich in plumage, but high in flavor,” he wrote in a 1792 poem). The bird is now presumed extinct. If Cartwright had been given any foresight, might he have changed his tactics? I suspect not. For although he was a relatively liberal man, he was also a highly pragmatic one, and upon hearing of the Eskimo Curlew's vanishing, he might have remarked, “Oh well, at least we still have plenty of ducks, geese, and grouse to net, snare, and shoot...”

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