

George Elson (ca. 1875-ca. 1950)

Each of us, in our more reflective moments, has speculated on the way a small turn of fate has transformed one's life, making it impossible ever to return completely to the old ways. George Elson, who grew up around Rupert's House on James Bay, must often have felt that way about his adventures with the Hubbard Labrador expeditions in 1903 and 1905.

We know little of Elson's childhood. His father, a Scot, worked for the Hudson's Bay Company and, as was often the custom of the country, married a Cree. George grew up nurtured by both cultures, yet in some respects caught between them, like so many children of mixed parentage. In his mid-twenties, having worked for a survey crew of the Grand Trunk Railroad, he found himself in Missanabie, Ontario, when fate struck. A journalist from New York by the name of Leonidas Hubbard, Jr., had written the Hudson's Bay post, seeking a reliable outdoorsman for an expedition to Labrador on behalf of *Outing* magazine. When two other candidates did not pan out, Elson was chosen.

Hubbard proved to be friendly and generous — full of an almost boyish enthusiasm. But he had never travelled the bush for an extended period, nor had his companion, Dillon Wallace,

a New York attorney. Elson felt at home in the woods, but could not help wondering about the expedition's outfit. It included two rifles and pistols, but no shotgun, which would make winging birds much more difficult. Nor was Hubbard able to purchase a gill net in Labrador, as he had hoped.

On July 15, 1903, the trio set off down Grand Lake from Northwest River Post, seeking to ascend the Naskapi River into central Labrador and witness the autumn caribou hunt of the Naskapi Indians. Anxious to make up for lost time, Hubbard missed the Naskapi River and instead headed up the tiny Susan Brook, which soon dwindled into a rock-filled obstacle course.

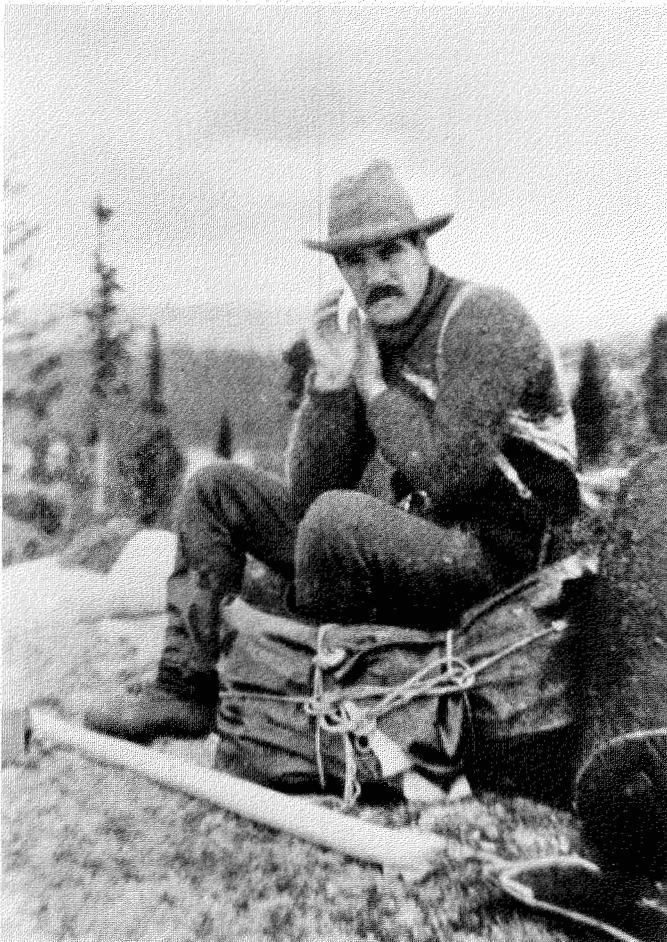
As conditions worsened, Elson saw the threat of starvation looming. However, he worked on uncomplainingly, for Hubbard wanted so much to bring back a "bully story" for *Outing*. By September 15 the expedition was halfway across Labrador, nearly out of food, and pinned down by storms. Elson's indirect but diplomatic tales of Indian starvation made clear to Hubbard what he must have already sensed deep down: they must turn back if they hoped to escape with their lives.

For the next month the men retraced their steps in raw weather. Elson, with remarkable skill, bagged an occasional goose, but with no shotgun and no gill net, the expedition's plight was desperate. Finally Hubbard collapsed, unable to proceed. Making him as comfortable as possible in a tent, Wallace and Elson continued down Susan Brook on October 18; three days later they parted in the midst of the season's first blizzard, Wallace to return to Hubbard with some moldy flour they had retrieved (left behind earlier in the expedition), Elson to go for help on Grand Lake.

For five days, he stumbled through snowdrifts, his trousers in tatters, his feet wrapped in scraps of blanket. But upon reaching Grand Lake, another river blocked the way. Somehow, Elson cobbled together a driftwood raft and pushed off. As his own account noted, "the strong current, and the tide and the ice overcame me, and took me out to the lake, then the wind caught me and carried me. . . . I got down on my knees and tried to keep the pieces [of the raft] together, and the sea would just cover me. For about two hours I stayed on the raft, and sure it was my finish." The current washed him onto an island, and he doggedly built a new raft, ignoring the icy weather. "Oh! but I was proud of that raft, and talking to myself all the time, and telling myself what a fine raft it was, and I was so proud of my raft. I got across safe and without much trouble at all." Oh, no trouble at all! Not for the likes of Elson, anyway.

Reaching a trapper's cabin, he sped rescuers upstream, but Hubbard was beyond help. He had died the day of the parting. Wallace was only barely alive — a hardly recognizable skeleton. Over that winter he and Elson recovered at Northwest River Post and returned home in May 1904.

There the story might have ended, but for a grieving widow. Devastated by the loss of her husband, Mina Hubbard turned from grief to anger. Why had her husband perished, when the other men had not? She summoned Elson in December 1904 to answer questions. As a half-breed, he had already worried what whites might think if he alone had survived; now his worst nightmares were fulfilled. Mina Hubbard, however, absolved



Elson in Labrador, 1905.



Leonidas Hubbard, Jr., about to embark.

him of blame; it was Dillon Wallace she felt had failed her husband. When Wallace, still loyal to the memory of his friend, announced he was returning to Labrador to finish Hubbard's work, Mina secretly organized an expedition of her own.

Elson refused to blame Wallace, yet he was attracted by Mina Hubbard's determination and charm. His primary loyalty lay with Hubbard, he felt, and when she asked him to take charge of her expedition, he agreed, recruiting two other friends from James Bay. Thus when Wallace headed north in June 1905, he was surprised to find a female rival determined to upstage him — with an able woodsman in charge of the task.

Under Elson's leadership, Mina Hubbard completed her expedition nearly flawlessly. The party visited the Naskapi, witnessed the caribou migration, and arrived at George River

Post in Ungava Bay on August 29. Wallace, who became lost pioneering an alternate route, did not arrive until mid-October. But the most poignant aspect of the tale was that Elson, struck by Mina Hubbard's kindness and spirited humor, seems to have fallen in love. As a half-breed, he knew that the barriers of caste made marriage unlikely, but he could not help confessing to his journal, indirectly, that he hoped to find "a white girl that would marry me and especially if she was well learnt." Mina Hubbard seems to have remained oblivious almost to the end, and Elson, who had rescued the first expedition from total disaster and masterfully led the second, returned home with his bittersweet triumph.

Little has been uncovered of Elson's later years. He married relatively late, to a Cree woman. Working for Revillon Fur Company, he settled at Moose Factory. Only once, in 1936, did he see Mina Hubbard again, when she visited him in her sixties. But the events of 1903 and 1905 remained indelibly in George Elson's mind. And he secured a place in the literature of exploration as the pivotal figure in both Hubbard expeditions.



Mina Hubbard on her 1905 Labrador expedition.

FURTHER READINGS

DAVIDSON, JAMES WEST, and RUGGE, JOHN. Forthcoming. *Great Heart: The History of a Labrador Adventure*.

HUBBARD, MINA BENSON. 1908. *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador*. Toronto: William Briggs. (Contains Elson's account of the 1903 expedition.)

WALLACE, DILLON. 1905. *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company.

_____. 1907. *The Long Labrador Trail*. New York: The Outing Publishing Company.

James West Davidson
7 Platt Avenue
Rhinebeck, New York 12572
U.S.A.

and
John Rugge
21 Garrison Street
Glens Falls, New York 12801
U.S.A.