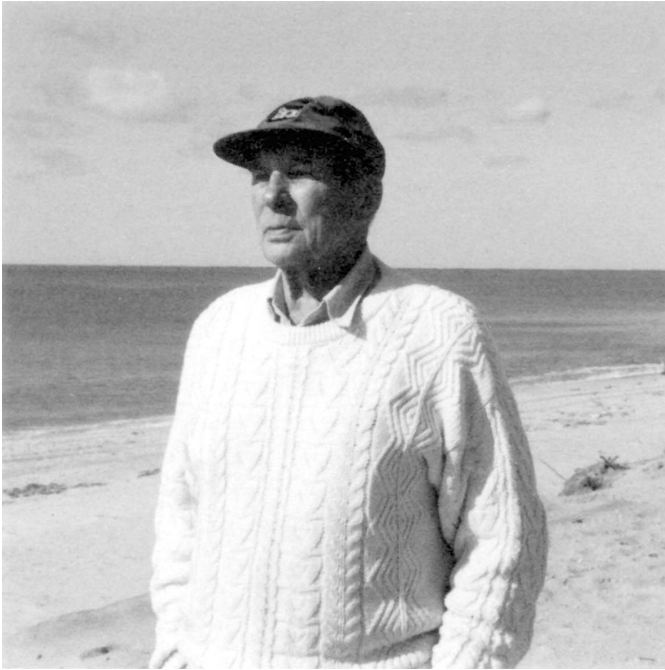


ELLIOT MERRICK (1905-1997)



Elliot Merrick at Nantucket, Massachusetts.

Elliot Merrick, Labrador author and traveler, died on 22 April 1997, less than three weeks before his 92nd birthday. Toward the end of his life, he would joke that he was so old that he'd become "historical." In fact, he was one of the last surviving links with pioneer Labrador—a place that makes the present-day Labrador of jet overflights and nickel mines seem like another country.

Raised in affluent Montclair, New Jersey, "Bud" (as he was known to his friends) was educated at Phillips Exeter Academy and Yale University. His first job was as a reporter for the *Passaic Daily News*: he drove to it in a model-T roadster that he bought from his brother-in-law for \$2.50. In 1928, he became assistant advertising manager for the National Lead Company, his father's firm. But how could a young man for whom Thoreau's *Walden* was almost a sacred text devote his heart and soul to producing copy for Dutch Boy paints?

Merrick's escape from the business world came in 1929, when he signed on as a summer Worker Without Pay with Labrador's Grenfell Mission. He fell in love with Labrador ("that pristine, beautiful land," he called it) and stayed on as a schoolteacher in Northwest River. He also fell in love with the Mission's resident nurse, Australian-born Kate Austen. They were married in 1930, and for a time lived in a small cabin near where the Goose Bay airport now stands.

Probably the high point of Bud's Labrador years was a trip he and Kate made with trapper John Michelin. They journeyed by canoe and portage up the Grand (now the Churchill) River and then continued by snowshoe and toboggan deep into the bush. All told, they covered 300

miles. Their encounter with a virtually unexplored wilderness more than made up for the trip's frequent hardships. In his journal, Bud wrote: "We have traveled to the earth's core and found meaning."

The Merricks returned to the United States in the early 1930s. "The day I left Labrador was the saddest of my life," Bud told me, adding: "A major in English literature from Yale hardly prepared me for a trapper's life." Eventually, they bought an old farm in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, one of the few parts of the country that could ever be mistaken for Labrador. Indeed, the similarity of northern Vermont to Labrador gave Bud the distance he needed to write about the latter.

His first book, *True North*, was published in 1933. This account of the trip with John Michelin so enthralled its Scribner editor, the legendary Maxwell Perkins, that he reputedly asked Bud if there was any work *he* could do in Labrador. *True North* has had the same effect on later readers, many of whom include it as an essential part of their outfit on northern trips. The book is a *Walden* of the North, its lyrical, curmudgeonly voice now celebrating Labrador's boreal wilderness, now inveighing against the urban wilderness.

Merrick continued writing about Labrador in his slightly fictionalized autobiography, *Ever the Winds Blow* (1936), a novel entitled *Frost and Fire* (1939), and various magazine pieces. Then, drawing on his wife's experiences as a nurse, he wrote *Northern Nurse* (1942), perhaps the finest book ever written about a woman's life in the North. It was reprinted in 1994, giving a new generation of readers a remarkable window on a way of life that has now passed into history.

The exigencies of raising a family forced Bud to give up writing, at least full-time writing, for work that was somewhat less haphazard. He spent 22 years as a science editor and publications officer for the U.S. Forest Service in Asheville, North Carolina. This did not prevent him from becoming a magnet for devotees of his books. We—I am in fact one of these devotees—would journey down to his farm outside Asheville as if on a pilgrimage: a pilgrimage not so much to a saint (Bud hated everything sanctimonious) as to an elder whose wisdom we could count on and whose advice helped us enormously in our own northern peregrinations.

Bud was a man who always nailed his colors to the mast. He once told me about an author on Arctic themes whose work he disapproved of: "Her new book burned quite well in my woodstove." It was obvious that he disapproved of my neoprene-and-aluminum snowshoes as well. I wrote him about their efficacy during a winter trip I made to Hudson Bay. He wrote back: "I have invented a snowshoe far superior to your aluminum ones. Its frames are composed of old garden hose, which bends readily, taking either the bearpaw shape or that of the Alaska tundra runner. Crossbars are of Victorian corset-stays bound

together with baling wire, and the mesh is of state-of-the-art chicken wire layered in an intricate pattern. I am depending on you as a qualified expert to see that my creation is installed in the Smithsonian's Hall of Artifacts."

I count myself fortunate to have been among the handful of people who were Bud's wandering eyes and ears in his final years. I'd encounter something unusual on a trip and think to myself, "Wait until Bud hears about *this!*" And when I got back, I'd ring him up. He would query me closely about what I'd seen, the topography of wherever I'd been, and even local ice conditions. Often I would hear the rustling of a map in the background. He may or may not have been living vicariously through these conversations. One thing I do know, however: without him as an invisible sidekick, my own journeys in the North will seem much less interesting. Much lonelier, too.

Elliot Merrick made no contribution to science; his trips did not result in new maps being drawn up, and he did not make any major or even minor archaeological finds. But his books about Labrador will live on to enthrall future generations of readers with the magic of the North.

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