

**The Height of Land**  
Ryan Arthurs

*His words ring in my ear as a call to duty.  
I see his dear, brave face before me now.  
I feel his lips upon my cheek.  
The smoke of the camp-fire in my blood.  
The fragrance of the forest is my nostrils.  
Perhaps it is God's will that I finish the work  
of exploration that Hubbard began.*

-Dillon Wallace, *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, 1905

In 1903, Leonidas Hubbard and two travel companions, Dillon Wallace and George Elson, departed the town of North West River for Ungava Bay. Their journey led them north across the Labrador Peninsula. Traveling via canoe, their route demanded both long paddles throughout a network of rivers and portages across heights of land. Hubbard was an outdoors writer from New York City. Although he regarded canoeing with passion, he had little practical experience in the bush. Their expedition was plagued by poor judgment and bad luck. Soon after departing, they took a wrong turn and spent much of the expedition trying to get back on course. With food supplies running out and cold weather approaching, Hubbard decided to turn back. He did not, unfortunately, act quickly enough—the explorer died of exhaustion just 30 miles from North West River.

Determined to keep the memory of her late husband alive, Mina Hubbard urged Dillon Wallace to write an account of the voyage. *The Lure of the Labrador Wild* was published in 1905 to commercial success in America, but it did not leave Mina satisfied. She sensed that Wallace's narrative favored the author over her husband. Historians have speculated that she grew increasingly suspicious that he had played a hand in her husband's death. Perhaps spurred on by pride, perhaps feeling the lure of the North herself, Mina resolved to complete her husband's expedition. She enlisted the help of George Elson—who had been a part of the previous voyage—along with two Cree natives. This journey, Mina believed, would clear her husband's name.

In the wake of the failed expedition, Dillon Wallace also felt dissatisfied. His expedition had failed. Success as an author could not replace that reality; instead it reminded him of it daily. Like Mina Hubbard, Wallace's damaged pride pushed him to attempt a second journey to Ungava Bay.

Both parties left the community of North West River on June 27, 1905. The press looked on hungrily. They described the two expeditions as a race and received significant attention back in the U.S. Despite poor weather at the outset, Mina Hubbard managed to traverse the 576 miles to the George River post on Ungava Bay in 43 days, arriving roughly seven weeks before Wallace. She became the first adventurer—man or woman—to complete the journey.

The Hubbard's story has long compelled my imagination. I find it to be one of the true adventure stories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and yet, it is also a romance. I find it both beautiful and haunting to follow the footsteps of someone you love in order to be closer to them.

\*

Like Leonidas, Mina, her two Cree guides, George Elson, and Dillon Wallace, I too have felt the urge to paddle Labrador's northern waters. I am drawn to their story by something I can only begin to describe. To walk where few have walked before; to sit beneath the aurora; to wake each morning to a desolate horizon; to know that my life rests completely in the hands of myself and my companions; these feelings completely overwhelm me.

"Perhaps it is God's will," writes Dillon Wallace, "that I finish the work / of exploration that Hubbard began" (from *The Lure of Labrador Wild*, 1905). For those who hear it, the call to travel north becomes insufferable. In the summer of 2012, I gave in. Five companions and I journeyed over 800 kilometers across the Canadian tundra following the Hubbards' route down the George River. Who can say what voice utters this call? It speaks to our most vulnerable selves. It teases out desire for adventure, pride, or love. It never grows silent.

While my trip down the George River took us far from civilization, I was not isolated. The five others who journeyed with me—Charlie, Zack, Brian, Henry, and Brent—are my brothers. If the north speaks to our most vulnerable selves, then it also breaks down interpersonal boundaries. Together, we paddled and portaged through

harsh terrain, we felt the same rays of sun, we battled hordes of biting insects, we struggled through the wind at our bows, and languished with the wind at our backs. All this, we experienced as one; and not one of us could have completed our trip alone.

While a remote canoe trip, therefore, comes about through private motivations and deep urges, it is ultimately an expression of love. We do not undertake a journey like this in order to travel from point a to point b. The pleasure lies in the journey itself. Every day, we grew further from civilization, further from our past selves, closer to the land, and closer to each other. In this way, I saw myself following in Mina Hubbard's footsteps. She was called on to complete her husband's journey as an ongoing commitment to their shared bond. Like Mina, I too feel a commitment to my companions with whom I had canoe-tripped before. The George River fortified our friendship immeasurably.

The photographs in *The Height of Land* attempt to capture in image what I cannot put into words. The selection explores the daunting physical and spiritual commitment it takes to cross a body of land and the importance of companionship in an uninhabited country. Some images exhibit bodily or emotional duress and may leave the viewer wondering 'why did someone choose to spend large quantities of time and money to finish this trip?' The space opened between the image and the viewer's understanding—this is where the lure of the north speaks, insistent and patient, waiting to address anyone who hears it.