

## Bernadette Hince

### Labrador Cure

On a small island off southern Labrador, the coast glitters pink and grey. If you stoop to look, you will see crystals of rock so big that they must have grown slowly when the earth cooled—a process I have to take on faith, but one I firmly believe because my elder brother once grew blue crystals of copper sulphate in jars in our laundry. Battle Harbour's ribbons of pegmatite are the colours of Australian galahs, large parrots that are wheeling and crying on a warm summer's day as I write these words, far from the shores of the Labrador.

Battle Island, in Saint Louis Sound at 52 degrees north, was once a central point in Labrador's salt fish and sealing trade. It is a small island. You can walk around it, dawdling, in an hour. On its inner shore is the settlement of Battle Harbour (figure 1). The old wooden buildings shelter from the North Atlantic's cold winds behind a low rocky hill. In the 1890s and 1900s, when the Labrador fishery was at its peak, 1400 fishing boats came to this coast in summer. The island was part of the world's most productive cod fishery. Now the fishermen have gone, and the cod too have gone.

There might once have been a battle at Battle Harbour. Another possible explanation is that the name came from a Portuguese word for boat, *betal*. I have not found any lexical proof of the latter, but it is plausible. There are traces of whalers, not Portuguese but Basques, in the fragments of warm red terracotta tiles on beaches just south of Battle Island at Red Bay.

I am a dictionary-maker, not an archaeologist. When I saw the pieces of terracotta on Red Bay's beaches, they puzzled me. Why did the Basques load their ships with heavy red tiles? It was surely too labour-intensive a cargo for ballast—rocks would have been easier and cheaper. A diorama of whaling days in the Red Bay museum provided the explanation. Its tiny model hut sheltered a rectangular brick stove with three black iron "trypots"—heavy cauldrons used for boiling down whale and seal fat or "blubber." This was how the Basques melted blubber to get a pure oil to sell for lighting and other industrial purposes. The hut in the diorama was

roofed with rows of terracotta tiles, tiny replicas of the same tiles whose remnants were scattered on the nearby beach. In the diorama the tiles were new, on the beach they were centuries old. The old tiles once roofed huts where real trypots stood. They were an integral part of the business of whaling—and it was whaling which drew the Basques to this coast 500 years ago.



Figure 1. Looking northwest over the village of Battle Harbour, Labrador.  
*Photo Michael Conzen.*

We took the gravel road northward from Red Bay along the Labrador coast. Roads service only a small part—perhaps 30 percent—of Canada’s landmass.<sup>1</sup> The Labrador coastal drive is a strip of angular grey rocks raised high above the surrounding countryside. In 2005 it ran as far north as the entrance to Sandwich Bay. It stopped here at Cartwright, the eponymous town of eighteenth century trader and diarist George Cartwright—affectionately known as “Old Labrador”—the first person to leave a written mention of Battle Harbour.<sup>2</sup>

Occasional spoon-drains ran out at an angle from the road, but there were no other tracks leading out into the landscape, and there was nowhere to pull safely off the road. Its bouldery edges were too steep for summer traffic. When winter came, snow would fill the ditches and give

easy passage onto the road for over-snow vehicles. As our bus drove along, it raised grey dust. The road's obvious newness invited questions seldom prompted by the older and more familiar roads of home. How was this road affecting the landscape? The soil, insects, plants, and animals? How long would it be before it was tarred? Had its creation encouraged new settlers to think of moving here? Who might come here?

An hour's drive north of Red Bay with its museum and its piles of broken tiles, we left the bus and motored by small boat to Battle Harbour. This was once the largest settlement in Labrador, headquarters of the "floater fishery" which brought thousands of seasonal fishermen from Newfoundland every summer. Here the missionary doctor Wilfred Grenfell set up a hospital in 1892. Once this village had a wireless station. On his way home from the Arctic in September 1909, Robert Peary used it to telegraph his claim of reaching the North Pole.

The village also had storerooms, a shop, a church, and huge wooden platforms called "flakes" for drying the fish. Workers laid split and cleaned sides of salted cod on the flakes "like a well-shingled roof," to use Newfoundland poet Michael Crummey's words.<sup>3</sup> The fish acquired a protective salt crust as it dried in the sun. "Labrador cure," softer, moister and more heavily salted than Newfoundland's salt cod, went to Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Greece. For every quintal (a hundredweight, 112 lb) of Labrador "semi-dry," 275 pounds of fresh split fish were needed.

The settlement occupied the facing shores of two islands separated by a shallow channel open to the sea at one end and Mary's Harbour at the other. Locals call narrow stretches of water like this a "tickle." Now the southern shore is abandoned, and Battle Island is inhabited only in summer. There are sometimes whales in the tickle, but the evening we arrived there were none. That day the power supply had failed and there was no electricity. In the darkness, the fishermen who had lived here in lantern days drew closer.

The island, one of Canada's National Historic Sites, is open to the public. It is the only such place in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador where guests can stay on the actual site. The wooden buildings have been restored and re-created by heritage carpenters.

One of these buildings, the bunkhouse, has a dozen and a half bunks in a large communal room. Perhaps these are the successors of the "births" that Labrador fishery manager Lambert de Boilieu wrote about in 1861, when he described a house "fitted up in the dormitory exactly like a ship, with fifteen to twenty births closed at the ends and open in the middle".<sup>4</sup> In addition to the main communal bedroom, there is a tiny cupboard-

bedroom. It has just enough room to walk between the built-in bunk and the wall when the door is closed. This was my room. It gave directly on to the kitchen, and felt as snug as I had always imagined the enclosed box-beds in paintings of old Dutch farmhouses would be. In the chill of northern June, the kitchen's wood-burning stove radiated a warmth that was needed more than usual in the absence of electric heating. I realised that this would have been the cook's room. I felt at home.

In the nearby provisions store was a polar bear carved out of iridescent labradorite, a mineral that gleams with colours. Some people think this rock was split to release the aurora or northern lights. Our candlelight supper ended with a dessert made from "bakeapple," not an apple at all but a berry, *Rubus chamaemorus*, the cloudberry of foggy British mountains, *hjutron* of Sweden's bogs or *laaka* of Finland's. Each plant bears a single raspberry-like fruit of glowing amber. Picking and cooking them is a labour of love. There was an aurora that night, but full of bakeapple I slept through it.

On the second day power was restored to Battle Harbour. The residents of the bunkhouse elected to carry on without it, and held an impromptu party that night in the bunkhouse kitchen. By kerosene lamplight, custodian and local historian Mike Earle sang "We are thy sons while life remains ... Labrador, our Labrador!"

Next morning I woke early and went out to walk. At the crest of a small rocky ridge, a sudden deep whooshing made me lift my head. It was a whale blowing. Its rounded back disappeared beneath the surface, not fifty feet offshore. I held my breath and counted. Minutes later the whale reappeared, far out to sea.

The words of Newfoundland and Labrador—its tickles, bakeapple, livyers and stationers—are so many and unusual by mainstream English standards that it takes a sizeable historical dictionary to document them.<sup>5</sup> Cod fishing had a vocabulary of its own that is itself close to poetry—large and small Madeira, West India, semi-dry, ordinary cure, large and small merchantable, the cut-throat and the tonguer. No single word is more tightly bound to the region's history than cod.

"It h'all goes back to de cod," Newfoundland historian Gordon Handcock told us. His father started fishing at Battle Harbour at the age of twelve, and Gordon's elder brother was the last fisherman of the family. Cod fishing in the area started long ago, in the 1770s. When Peary sent his telegram a century ago, the province's economy depended almost wholly on it. In the 1950s the fisheries buckled. Catches varied from year to year; Confederation with Canada in 1949 had come at the same time as

restructuring of the pricing system; the southern European markets had not recovered after World War II; and Labrador cod was now a low-value fish. At the same time, the sealing finally ended at Battle Harbour.

In 1992 a moratorium stopped Newfoundland and Labrador's cod fishing.<sup>6</sup> The province's population was 580,000. Now it is 500,000. Of those, only 30,000 live "down the Labrador." Since 2004 a little commercial cod fishing has resumed. The quota for it in 2009 was 11,500 tonnes.

Tourism is one of the few economic activities that has replaced fishing, but tourists can be as fickle as cod, and not many of the Labrador's small number of tourists come to Battle Harbour. What will happen to this quiet island, whose history I briefly dwelt in? If you go to Battle Harbour, tell me how it fares.

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### Notes

1. Dick and Gallagher 2005, 1.
2. Story 2000, online.
3. Michael Crummey "Making the Fish," in *Hard light*.
4. Lambert de Boillieu, quoted at The Rooms, 2006
5. Story et al. 1982.
6. Cadigan 2001, 32.

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