



Lydia and Daniel Campbell at their home in Cul de Sac, near Rigolet, ca. 1875 (Flora Baikie collection, Them Days).

“I, old Lydia Campbell”: a Labrador Woman of National Historic Significance

This is the second season of Field Notes, written weekly while the author is conducting archaeological research in St. Michael’s Bay as part of the multi-disciplinary research project “Understanding the Past to Build the Future” (www.mun.ca/labmetis/index.html) which examines early Inuit presence in southern Labrador.

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“I, old Lydia Campbell, 75 years old, I puts on my outdoor clothes, takes my game bag and axe and matches, in case it is needed, and off I goes over across the bay, over ice and snow for about two miles and more, gets three rabbits some days out of twenty or more rabbit snares all my own chopping down. It looks pretty to see them hung up in what we calls Hoists. And you say, well done old woman.”

These words were written by Lydia Campbell in 1894 and they form part of her remarkable account of early Labrador life, “Sketches of Labrador Life by a Labrador Woman.” In 2009, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada designated Lydia Campbell (1818-1905) as a person of national historic significance. As one of Labrador’s best known and most cherished historical figures, “Aunt Lydia” was honoured for her chronicles as well as for her role as a cultural mediator in the changing social landscape of the early 19th century. In the words of her biographer Dr. Anne Hart in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, “this ‘quaint old lady’ was held in high regard as a notable matriarch and transmitter of Labrador memories.” Through her writing and through the oral traditions that have been passed down through hundreds of her descendants, Campbell has long been an iconic figure and a touchstone to Labrador’s Inuit and English-Scottish past.

Born Lydia Brooks on 1 November 1818 along the shore of Double Mer inlet in Groswater Bay, she represents the first generation of Labradorians of British and Inuit parentage. Her mother was an Inuk whom we know only as Susan. Her father was an Englishman named Ambrose Brooks who came to Groswater Bay in 1800 to escape British press gangs. The youngest of three daughters, Lydia grew up speaking English and Inuktitut. Susan passed vital Inuit skills to her daughters that included trapping, shooting, and fishing as well as medical knowledge and the preparation of skin-clothing and country foods. Ambrose Brooks, the son of a minister, taught his daughters to read English using the few texts in his possession, which were the Bible and the Church of England Common Book of Prayer. Brooks was one of the earliest Europeans south of the Moravian stations to teach his children to read. He also instilled a Christian faith that remained a source of strength for Lydia throughout her long life.

Campbell married twice. At the age of 16 she was married against her wishes to another mixed-blood Labradorian named William Blake, Jr. whose father had come to Labrador in the 1780s. With Blake she had five children, one of whom, Thomas, continued the family line. After Blake’s death in 1845, she lived alone with her children for three years. In 1848, she married Daniel Campbell who had come to Labrador in 1844 from South Ronaldsey, Orkney, to work a five-year contract as cooper for the Hudson’s Bay Company at Rigolet. The two were married by the newly arrived factor, Donald A. Smith (later Lord Strathcona) whom they befriended over

the course of his 21 years in Labrador. They had six children, two of whom, Margaret and John, continued the Campbell family line. In addition to her biological children and in the tradition of many Labrador families, Lydia and Daniel also raised two informally adopted children. The first was an Inuk named Lemuel George, who died tragically when he was ten. The second, Hugh Palliser, was taken in when Lydia and Daniel were in their 70s. Hugh took the Campbell name and has a number of descendants. Lydia Campbell’s many descendants live throughout Labrador and her extensive family tree has been compiled by Patty Way of Cartwright, Labrador.

Over the course of her long life, Campbell became somewhat of a legend among the people of Groswater Bay for her endurance and her many skills. Along with her sister Hannah, she was part of a small group of first generation Labradorians of mixed descent who passed on their education to their children. This led to a phenomenon noted by visiting clergy and other officials in the late 1800s and early 1900s whereby Hamilton Inlet was one of the few places in the British colonies where residents were not only versed in the Christian liturgy without ever having had a resident clergy, but were also remarkably literate despite the absence of teachers.

In 1894, Aunt Lydia became relatively famous beyond her Groswater Bay homeland when visiting clergyman Arthur Charles Waghorne asked her to write an account of her life, which he published in 13 short installments in The Evening Herald, St. John’s. Campbell had previously written an account of her life for a Reverend A.A. Adams, “but he lost it.” “Sketches of Labrador Life by a Labrador Woman” reflects the distinctive style of her home-grown education and early Labrador English. It is the first published writing by someone born and raised in Labrador and remains an important source of historical information on family life, settlement, culture change, with brief vignettes of Inuit and Innu life. “Sketches” is also the beginning of a now lengthy Labrador tradition of home-style narrative put to paper. It was followed by daughter Margaret Baikie’s Labrador Memories: Reflections of Mulligan, written about 1918 and covering the years as far back as 1846. “Sketches” was published by Them Days in 1980.

Lydia Campbell is representative of other Inuit and part-Inuit women throughout Canada’s North who were the key to the success of colonial efforts. They gave European newcomers a foothold in a new and relatively harsh country through their knowledge and skills. It was women such as Campbell who taught their European partners how to build appropriate homes, and how to trap, fish, and travel. Daniel Campbell, for instance, “did not know much about trapping,” wrote their daughter Margaret Baikie, “my mother used to go with him to set the traps.”

Campbell was sought out by several church representatives at a time when the Moravian, Wesleyan Methodist, Anglican, and Roman Catholic churches all considered setting up ministries in Groswater Bay. Missionaries were sent to her because of her well-known piety but especially because she was considered an Elder and a representative voice. At his first Sabbath service in Groswater Bay in 1902, Methodist Reverend Arminius Young wisely followed Campbell’s advice. “Now, my son,” she had cautioned him, “you must go out into the kitchen and talk to the people as the other ministers used to do If you don’t the people won’t like you.”

One of Labrador’s best known historical figures, Lydia Campbell’s writing and the stories that are still told about her have given the people of Labrador, with their multi-cultural Inuit, Innu, and European roots some of their history, in turn affirming self-identification to place through knowledge about the past.