

In Camera: A Retrospective of Nigel Markham's Labrador Films

Labrador Life

Vol. 11 No. 1

Winter 2017

SURFIN' THE STRAND

Journey to one of
Labrador's Wonders

Game Changer

Planned port in Nunavut opens up
opportunities for Labrador businesses

WOODING

The chore that
warms you twice

ISBN 097831960-5

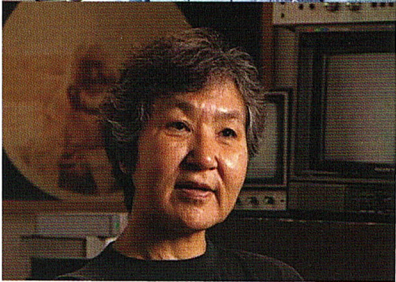


9 780978 319601

\$3.95 HST Included

Jolene Ashini

A Daughter of Labrador



In Camera

Retrospective of Nigel Markham's Labrador films

story by Mark Turner

Nigel Markham listens. This is the thing that defines his work as a filmmaker. "I'm not particularly interested in my point of view," he acknowledges. "I'm much more comfortable with giving over the film and the opportunity to make a film to my subject. That's why I'm interested in the first place. I don't have an agenda." His films provide a space for us to hear.

Since 1974, Markham has listened intently to Labradorians.

Coming first to document the last run of the Grenfell Mission ship, *The Strathcona*, he has spent the intervening years helping to tell stories as diverse as the impact of low-level flying upon the Innu, the forced relocation of Inuit from Hebron, and the legacy of Moravian music in northern Labrador. For Labradorians, his most celebrated film is *The Last Days of Okak* (1985), co-directed with Anne Budgell. In it, Maggie Saunders, Rosie Ford, Emelia Merkeratsuk and Martha Joshua provide first-hand accounts of the decimation of Okak by the Spanish Flu. It is, perhaps, one of the furthest travelled stories

arts and entertainment

to come out of Labrador. The film has screened as far away as Taiwan.

Markham's work as a filmmaker extends beyond Labrador subjects, of course. But his long relationship with the place and its people is important because of both the stories he has helped to tell and the way he has learned to tell stories. The two cannot be separated.

Like many, what had attracted Markham to Labrador was a desire to explore. The result of a cold call to Dr Tony Paddon, his position as photo-documentarian of *The Strathcona's* last run provided a means to see the northeast of the continent. Deposited at the Happy Valley-Goose Bay dock at the end of the summer of 1974, Markham directly secured a position as a cameraman at the newly opened Canadian Broadcasting Corporation station. In turn, that work would lead to an engagement with the newly formed *Them Days*. Markham first provided assistance with the photography and layout of the magazine before taking on full-time work on a joint project between *Them Days* and the Labrador Inuit Association that would see the foundation of the *Them Days* photography archive and the production of photographs for *Our Footprints Our Everywhere: Inuit Land Use and Occupancy in Labrador*. He relocated to St. John's in 1979, taking a post as a cameraman once again at the CBC.

Those four years were consequential. On the one hand, they led Markham to develop relationships throughout the region that would serve as the basis for many of his films. During the period, he even found time to assist Bill Ritchie in the creation of an experimental film called *Mirage* (1983), featuring Thomas Noah and Gilbert Haye. But on the other hand, they led him to develop a fundamental component of his storytelling craft. Reflecting on *The Last Days of Okak*, he speaks plainly about his approach.

"That has something to do with the time that I spent at *Them Days*. You start seeing the picture as not some generic image that you are throwing in somewhere. You actually know what the



The Last Days of Okak, directed by Anne Budgell and Nigel Markham; produced by Ken Martin. National Film Board of Canada, 1985. Opposite: *Eye of the Storm*.

image is and the context of it". For Markham, photography – as a form of historical record – conveys meaning. "With *Last Days*, they were principally all of Samuel Hutton's images [Hutton worked as a doctor in Okak in the years preceding the Spanish Flu]. There were a

few that weren't, where we did need some other images. But almost all were from Okak. They weren't generic shots from some guy who was in Nain or somewhere else. They were all from within that context and in many cases they were identifiable people". *continued...*



Quality Tourism Excellence Award Finalist

Located in Downtown Happy Valley



- 1 & 2 Bedroom Housekeeping Suites
- All Rooms Have Pillow Top Mattresses, Air Conditioning, LCD TVs & More
- Complimentary High Speed Internet
- Continental Breakfast Included



3 Royal Street **709-896-2456**
Toll Free: 1-888-440-2456 www.royalinnandsuites.ca

Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador



Place of the Boss: Utshimassits, directed by John Walker, produced by Peter D'Entremont, Mike Mahoney and John Walker. National Film Board of Canada, 1996.

The point is subtle, but important. For many documentary filmmakers, the historical record serves other purposes. Images of photos, documents, places and things help to maintain visual interest and support the appearance of truth. But for Markham, such things have a voice. And in the case of *Last Days*, that voice is given room alongside the voice of the survivors, speaking with them. There is always a historical voice in his work.

During its long development time – *Last Days* took shape between 1979 and 1985 – Markham worked on a number of other productions for both the CBC and the NFB. For the CBC, he instigated and shot the footage for two episodes of *Land & Sea on Them Days Magazine* in 1981. In 1984, he shot footage for an episode of *Land & Sea* called “Mushuau Innu”. For the NFB, he began pre-production on a project focussing on life in the Innu camps in the interior of Labrador. That project did not yield a film. But it did help to lay the groundwork for two other films produced by the NFB: *Hunters and Bombers* (1991), co-directed with Hugh Brody and *Place of the Boss: Utshimassit* (1996), directed by John Walker.

For Markham, the motivation for *Hunters and Bombers* was direct. “Our object was to focus on the people behind the protests because at that particular time people didn’t know who the Innu were from the personality side. People didn’t know Elizabeth Penashue and they didn’t know her sisters. And they didn’t know Daniel Ashini. And they didn’t know what the motivation was”.

But space for these voices is not enough. What is vital is that the voices are of the film’s subjects. “The thing that I was the proudest about that film was that we accommodated the language,” he reveals. “We got everything translated so we

were not just dealing with pictures and images and ideas but we were dealing with moments of people speaking amongst themselves, or going on, or what have you. And we made the effort to do that and somebody said – because we used subtitles – it was like watching a foreign film. And I thought, OK, we’re halfway there. Because that’s the kind of reality we wanted to give: you’re dealing with a different culture, they speak a different language, so it is a foreign kind of thing. *And that’s the whole point.* And I was proudest of that, with that film”.

He would bring the same sensibility to his work on *Place of the Boss: Utshimassits*. Shot in the wake of the 1992 Davis Inlet People’s Inquiry, which helped propel the relocation of the community to Natuashish, he worked alongside Camille Fouillard to broker interviews for the film and served as its cinematographer. Under John Walker’s direction, the final product is visibly different from Markham’s work, but the precise attention given to voice bears his mark. *Place of the Boss* does not create a story for the community. It allows the community to tell its own story on its own terms, something films by non-Innu filmmakers are seldom able to do.

More complex are the results of his 1997 film *In Caribou Country: The Adventures of William Brooks Cabot in Labrador, 1903-1910*, the first to be produced by his own Lazybank Productions. Taking as its subject the American engineer William Brooks Cabot, the film chronicles a handful of his seasonal expeditions to the interior of Labrador and encounters with the Innu. Markham recalls, “there was a disparate collection of material: there was this written material and all this photographic material that really hadn’t been seen that Stephen [Loring of the Smithsonian Institution] had been collecting. And there was no real relationship between the two in terms of where those photographs fit in the narrative. That was the puzzle of the film: let’s try to figure it out”.

The visuals are meticulous. Often, Markham uses Cabot’s landscapes as a starting point for his own visuals, seamlessly fading from one of Cabot’s still photos of a river or a mountain to his own moving image of the same feature. But the voice Markham recovers here is complicated and often ignorant of the people it describes. “So it was a historical recovery project. In hindsight, that’s a given,” he considers. “So does that really justify the film?” The question itself reveals the political commitments of the filmmaker and his relationship to the voices he uncovers.

For his next two films, produced for the OKâlaKatiget Society, the interrogation of the historical voice would be crucial. *Forever in Our Hearts: Memories of the Hebron Relocation/Ommatimmiut-agennaniattavut: IkKaumset Hebaron-imit Notitausimanningit* (2001) – a companion to Carol Brice-Bennett’s book of the same name – documents the fiftieth anniversary reunion of Inuit forcibly relocated from the community of Hebron. *Without Consent: The Resettlement of Inuit of Northern Labrador /Angimajuka Tinnagu: Notitausimanningi Inuit Labrador Tagganimiut* (2003) exam-

ines the motivations behind the decision to resettle the community. This decision remains one of the most contentious in post-Confederation Labrador, a point made clear through these films. Both speak with each other. In *Forever in Our Hearts* the evacuees themselves tell of the process of being made to close their community, of taking up residence elsewhere, and of the effects of a life in exile. In *Without Consent*, those that took the decision to close the community talk through their historical records. The words of these church leaders, government administrators and health officials outline an echo chamber in which the decision was taken. Neither listened to each other. All were consigned to the fate of the community once the prospect of resettlement had been broached. Together, these films reveal the consequences of history.

During the 2000s, Markham's output as a director slowed. "I was much happier shooting, generally," he considers. "I found it much more collaborative and I found directing really solitary. I never found the collaborations that I feel I do with other people. I don't mean that to blow my own horn. I mean where you engage in a subject with somebody and you're working towards this thing together. You have a dialogue with somebody and you can throw ideas out – two heads are better than one – and ideas can come from anywhere. And they're not always your own".

The impulse to collaborate is clear in his most recent film, *Till We Meet Again: Moravian Music in Labrador* (2012). Coming out of Dr Tom Gordon's



Hunters and Bombers, directed by Hugh Brody and Nigel Markham; produced by Alan Hayling and Rex Tasker. National Film Board of Canada, 1991.

research on Moravian Labrador Inuit music, *Till We Meet Again* tells the story of that tradition against the backdrop of a contemporary ensemble touring the North Coast during Easter performing repertoire from the tradition. It is a film that only Markham could make. Balancing the voices of the musicologist Gordon, members of the touring ensemble, tradition bearers and local audiences, he tells the story of a complex musical tradition that deeply resonates in Moravian Inuit Labrador. For another director, these voices would have little to communicate with each other. Markham's ears perceive shared reverence for the tradition. Working from this

foundation, he creates a film that moves beyond describing the music and begins to make us feel it.

Now, a little over 30 years after the release of *The Last Days of Okak*, Markham's body of work in Labrador is without equal. This has much to do with scope. Since beginning work on *Last Days* he has served as a key creative on no less than a dozen productions in Labrador. His work, including *Eye of the Storm* (1997), takes up half of the National Film Board's *Unikkausivut – Nunatsiavut* box set. But this also has much to do with what his films do. They listen and they allow us to hear. This is a rare combination. ㄩ