

WILF AND THE LIVYERS

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I broach again a theme that I first ventilated before this audience in "Second to Lindbergh" on 8 June 1992; that is, the subject of forgotten heroes of my (and your?) childhood. Pondering the lives and excellent qualities of these heroes would, it was hoped, inspire us and make us into better persons.

Before I begin the body of my paper, I ask for your patient toleration and understanding as I indulge myself with a series of asides, meanderings, free associations and ruminations.

The detritus, perhaps, of an aging magpie brain.

Among my heroes were the men who ran the dogsleds carrying the diphtheria serum to Nome in 1925. My first aside. A new book, The Cruellest Miles, by Guy and Laney Salisbury, recounted the tale of this epic last year. That exploit, also, was the origin of the Iditarod, which Norman Vaughan, dog handler on the first of Admiral Richard Byrd's expeditions to Antarctica, and now well into his nineties was, last I heard, still running. By the way, dogs, which provided essential transport for most early Antarctic explorations, have been condemned as environmental pollutants and are now forbidden the continent. There was Sister Kenny (Rosalind Russell in the 1946 film hagiography). The good nurse, pre-Salk and Sabin, exercised the limbs of young Polio victims.

Once, when we were discussing the subject of forgotten heroes, a younger colleague of mine observed that "Rodger Young" - that's with a "d" - was in his grade school songbook. "Rodger Young," I thought that only I, who still mourn the shattering of my 78 RPM disc, remembered the song. Young, an infantryman, was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously after wiping out a Japanese machine gun nest. The War Department, in an endeavor to provide the infantry with a morale-raising counterpart to the Navy's "Anchors Aweigh" and the Marines' "Halls of Montezuma," commissioned Frank Loesser, later of "Guys and Dolls", to compose it. "Rodger Young, Rodger Young, fought and died for the men he lived among..." The haunting minor-key melody is running through my mind at this very moment. But, since most people have never heard it, it failed its purpose. Still, the song appears in Robert Heinlein's 1948 sci-fi novel Space Cadet. Here is a Cincinnati connection: Heinlein's brother, Jay was, for years, a Professor of Political Science at DC. Space Cadet was filmed in the nineties as "Starship Trooper". The producers missed a good bet by not including "Rodger Young" in the score. And, of course, there was Admiral Byrd, the subject of my 1992 essay.

The detritus of an aging magpie brain.

One such model set before the youth of the first four decades of the last century was Dr. Wilfred Thomason Grenfell. His friends and relatives called him "Wilf" and so contributed to my title. But I feel somehow uncomfortable and over-familiar doing so; accordingly I shall address him as Grenfell or as Wilfred throughout this paper.

Grenfell was born on 28 February 1865 in Cheshire, England. The family liked to claim descent from the Elizabethan Richard Grenville, Captain of the famous and doomed ship Revenge. Perhaps. There is a spurious coat-of-arms in the background of a collateral branch of the family. All that is certain is that a Pascoe Grenfell was a merchant in Penzance in 1689 and that his son moved to London and married a daughter of the sheriff.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century the family had "bootstrapped" itself up from trade to the professions. Wilfred's father had gone from Rugby to Balliol and become a headmaster of Mostyn House School, which had been purchased by a great uncle in 1867. The school was named after a hotel, which stood on the spot in 1810.

The death of Wilfred's grandfather left his wife and children so poor that they moved to France where the cost of living was lower. Grenfell's father attended Rugby and Oxford on scholarships. After twenty years as headmaster, he was the owner of Mostyn House School. The school was small- thirty to forty boys. Wilfred's mother, who was born in India, managed it, and his father lived immersed in clouds of Latin and Greek. The easy-going parents spent the summers in France and Switzerland, leaving their sons pretty much to rear themselves.

Mostyn House School was near Parkgate, a small village on the estuary of the River Dee. The area provided a superb playground for Wilfred and his older brother Algernon. They built a boat, they sailed the Irish Sea, they swam, they fished, they hunted, all pretty much unsupervised. Two things about this "harum-scarum" early life are, I think, significant. First, Wilfred never lost his yen for vigorous physical activity. Second, he had virtually no acquaintance with discipline. Throughout his life those in authority over him, as well as people he worked with, frequently and deeply mourned his absence. Grenfell never became an organization man.

When he was fourteen Grenfell was sent off to Marlborough. Like most English public schools of the time Marlborough taught the classics, but most of all it copied Arnold of Rugby in emphasizing sports and the cult of chivalric manliness. There followed a brief stay at Oxford where he majored in sports. For a while Grenfell toyed with the prospects of becoming a clergyman - his parents and he were committed evangelicals - but he finally ended up in London Hospital Medical College. Meanwhile his father had left Mostyn House, become chaplain at another London hospital, entered a neurotic decline and hanged himself in an asylum. His mother lived on for decades to see her son become the famous "Labrador Doctor".

In London those were the days of settlement houses, Wilfred worked with street urchins, teaching them manly sports and taking them to the seaside. At the hospital he worked under Dr. Frederick Treves. Yet another aside. It was Dr. Treves who treated the famous "Elephant Man"; it was Dr. Treves also who performed the appendectomy on Edward VII which delayed his coronation. He continued to be closely associated with Grenfell's career.

Grenfell also looked in on a tent meeting held by Dwight L. Moody and was moved to testify. Apparently he experienced no sudden revelation, no sobbing and trembling pilgrimage down the sawdust trail. He didn't have to. After all, he had been reared in an evangelical family. His faith was uncomplicated: belief in the saving grace

of Jesus, with the characteristic nineteenth century accretions of sabbatarianism and teetotalism. Joyful and apparently unquestioned, his faith sustained him all his life. So, when he was twenty-two, the man was pretty-well formed: a physician, a devoted Christian and a vigorous outdoors-man. Until his wife took him in hand later he was very careless about his dress; it was a rare day when his socks matched. He also subscribed to the school of "cold bath every morning." Sometimes this took the form of a dip into the North Atlantic; at others a hosing down with sea water on the deck of a moving ship. Of medium height, slender, mustached, Grenfell looked rather like our own Trustee Dave Edmundson, although Grenfell was less follically-challenged and a bit shorter than brother Edmundson. The young Grenfell was eager for a life of vigorous Christian service.

Dr. Treves provided the challenge. At Treves' suggestion Grenfell accepted a position with the (later Royal National) Mission to Deep See Fishermen. Thus began an association which endured for forty years. It was also to be an association characterized by frustration for, although Grenfell was a hardworking committed servant, he also turned out to be a very unruly one. The goal of the Mission was to ameliorate the harsh living conditions of fishermen who spent two months at a time in the North Sea. Especially since they were currently being exploited by the owners' "grog ships, called "copers", which seduced them with booze and pornography.

The task fit Grenfell's inclinations and abilities perfectly. Jumping from deck to deck in stormy seas, using his new medical skills to heal men's bodies, preaching the Gospel to save their souls, and challenging the "copers" by selling at cost such "comforts" as cheap tobacco, food and sweets. But no booze or dirty pictures.

A modernization of fishing procedures soon took the men ashore more frequently. And seaports have always been rich in occasions of sin. Without consulting his superiors Grenfell traveled widely, preaching and raising money for Seamen's Institutes. There the men could enjoy worthwhile and character-building activities rather than indulge in vice. Bypassed, the Mission office plaintively ordered him to stay in one place so that he could handle routine business. He was also to report any future plans before he did anything about them.

By then news of the Mission's good works had traveled across the Atlantic to England's oldest colony, Newfoundland. It had been established, and still existed, to serve as a vase for cod-fishermen on the Grand Banks. Some 25,000 of them stayed on the coast of Labrador during the fishing season in conditions of squalid poverty. They were also in the thrall of Newfoundland merchants; under the "truck" system the merchants provided over-priced supplies and collected the cash in payment. The results result was indebtedness and deplorable living conditions. The desperate plight of the men of the Grand Banks presented a clear call of the Christian services of the Mission.

In June 1892 Grenfell set out across the Atlantic to an adventure which would determine the course of the rest of his life and transform him into the famous "Labrador Doctor". He sailed on the Mission hospital ship of 155 gross tons and with a nine-man crew. After the Albert stopped at St John it sailed through icebergs one thousand miles up the desolate and rocky coast of Labrador. "God", it was said, "made the world in five days, Labrador on the sixth and on the seventh threw stones at it." Photographs in Grenfell's 1919 autobiography show a barren unforgiving land. He found it beautiful.

Perhaps. But the very word "Labrador" conjures up to me bitter cold, biting winds, ice: the epitome of frigid discomfort. Labrador, by the way, was named after the navigator on John Cabot's 1497 voyage. He was a landowner, or Labrador, from the Azores Islands.

Grenfell was also appalled by what he found. The residents called themselves "livyers" because they "live here", and they lived in conditions worse than Grenfell had encountered in the East London rookeries. They fished in Kipling's Captains Courageous style in leaky two-men dories and came ashore to live in filthy huts. Their clothes were tattered, they were tubercular, children had rickets, and most were unlettered. As for medical care, one "healer's" remedy for gripe was nine lice swallowed every third day for nine days. It was charged that the infrequent government handouts of flour and molasses had made many of them hopelessly dependent and lacking the spunk to improve their lots.

During his first two months in Labrador Grenfell sailed over three thousand miles, visited fifty settlements and treated nine hundred patients. Word of his good work had preceded him to St. John's where he was lionized. The colonial government promised help by erecting two hospitals and providing continuing financial support.

Back in the UK Grenfell developed further another aspect of his persona. Successful evangelizing has always gone hand-in-hand with passing the plate, the Grenfell spent more and more time speaking before increasingly large public meetings. As time passed fund-raising was to become his primary activity. In 1893 he raised enough to purchase a new hospital ship, the Princess May, to carry him back to Labrador.

As Captain of the frail and cranky steamer Grenfell spent the summer of 1893 on the Labrador coast. The Admiralty had not yet charted fully the rocky and iceberg strewn waters but Grenfell, undaunted, was determined to go full steam ahead through the unknown islands, shoals, ice floes and heavy seas. The coast of Labrador would not be mocked and several times Grenfell ran Princess May aground. They dropped off building materials, a doctor and two nurses for a hospital at Battle Harbor. At every stop used clothing, comforts and uplifting religious tracts were distributed. Services were held, the ship's crew, doubling as a choir, sang, Grenfell spoke movingly about the white Christ and doctored the ill and injured. In 108 days he traveled 2500 miles, he had treated 794 patients, held sixty services before 5200 people and delivered twenty lectures. The latter he illustrated with colored lantern slides. He had found his metier and had established a pattern for many years to come.

Before he left for home he spoke before a large meeting in Halifax. Carried away by his enthusiastic reception he established a new branch of the Mission without, of course, authorization from the London office. He spread the word in Montreal and Ottawa, and rode the new railway to Victoria, British Columbia, without, again, first checking with London. Money was raised and important contacts were made, especially with Sir Donald Smith, later Lord Strathcona. Smith was president of the Hudson Bay Company, the Canadian Pacific Railroad, as well as the bank of Montreal.

Grenfell's speaking styles was now set: anecdotes about the bravery and hardships of the livyers and their physical and spiritual needs. All illustrated by his own lantern slides of Labrador life. He was becoming less and less a man of the Mission and more

and more identified with the fortunes of Labrador. Vainly, the London office tried once more to rein in their industrious and dedicated, but wayward, superintendent.

In 1895 Grenfell sought a wider audience to support the cause of Labrador. For years he had been sending articles to the Mostyn House School paper and articles about the North Sea fishermen to the Mission's journal Toilers of the Deep. Now he published the first of what was to total thirty-three books: Vikings of Today. In it he described the landscape of Labrador, the unfortunate condition of the livyers and the work of the Mission. Although he assigned the profits to the Mission, Labrador was becoming less and less identified with the mission and more and more with its employee, Grenfell.

Dutifully, he spent two years in England as superintendent, for the last time, of North Sea affairs. Frustrated by petty administrative details, he tended to be behindhand and casual in dealing with the business affairs of the Mission.

By the turn of the century both the Labrador Mission and the reputation of Grenfell had reached the take-off point. Three hospitals and the Strathcona were treating 3,000 patients a year. In addition to the salaried employees volunteers, mostly from the United States, swarmed to Labrador. Mostly young college students, their motivations were similar to those of the Peace Corps members later in the twentieth century. They earned the inelegant nickname "wops", after one spoiled volunteer complained that he resented being worked like a "wop". In those pre-politically correct days Grenfell insisted that the sobriquet stick as badge of honor. Among the "wops" in the 1930s were both the young Nelson and Lawrence Rockefeller.

Grenfell's fund-raising netted him important contacts: William Lyon McKenzie King, future Canadian Prime Minister, editors of influential magazines and pastors of rich congregations. Articles glorified the heroic self-sacrificing medical missionary. The first of many "Grenfell Associations" was founded in New York in 1906. Labrador was becoming more and more a North American, especially an United States, enterprise in funding and in manpower.

The good works in Labrador rested on a fundamental assumption. Deserving livyers must not be reduced to the status of undeserving poor. Early in livyers chopped wood in exchange for clothes and supplies. Grenfell started cooperative associations, thus angering Newfoundland merchants, lumber mills to feed the Harmsworth press in London, fur trapping. Livyer women were taught arts and crafts in a new "industrial department". In the 1930s three products were to be identified as "Grenfell Crafts" and marketed widely in the United States.

After the Second World War one of the best known of these was Grenfell cloth. Last year on an Elderhostel in Istria I met Jack who had bought, and liked a Grenfell wind-breaker. But someone stole it. I have seen Grenfell cloth. My sister bought a red coin purse and a red glass holder in St John's. It is a tightly-woven man-made fabric purported to be impermeable to both wind and water.

In the summers he captained a hospital ship up and down the coast; occasionally he ran it aground. To traverse the frigid winter wastes reindeer were imported at great expense, and with no success, from Lapland.

In the spring of 1908 Grenfell had an adventure which elevated him to the stature of true hero. Despite the fact the winter ice was breaking up and despite the fact that he was a neophyte with the komatik (dog sled) he set off to deal with an emergency fifty miles away. It rained, the ice did break up, the komatik sank, and the mission doctor ended up marooned on a partially submerged ice floe moving out to the open sea. He cut off his boots and fashioned the leather into a jacket. A firm believer in the great chain of being, he sacrificed three dogs and wrapped their carcasses around himself and a live dog to fend off the cold. From the frozen bones of the dead dogs he built a flagpole and attached his shirt. Finally he was rescued and other men transported his patient to the hospital in time.

Churlish persons might note that Grenfell's rashness had not only caused a great deal of worry among his friends and associates, but that it also cost a great many man hours from those who searched for him and those who saved his patient. On the other hand he had displayed heroic qualities: an humanitarian goal, a determination to succeed against overwhelming odds, and so on. And so it was perceived among his friends, admirers and publicists. The American and British press circulated sensational accounts of his travails. Grenfell himself wrote it up in Adrift on an Ice Pan, and another account by George Andrews was still selling thousands of copies in the 1920s. Plaques honoring the slaughtered dogs were mounted at St. Anthony Hospital and at Mostyn House School.

Grenfell's next adventure was his marriage in 1909. He met the twenty-three year-old Anna McClanahan while crossing the Atlantic on the new Mauretania in 1907. From Lake Forest, Illinois, a graduate of Bryn Mawr, she was financially independent and very savvy about managing money. It was a good marriage. Anna immersed herself into her husband's work and made sure that his socks matched. She brought order and some trappings of upper-middle class Lake Forest society into Grenfell's life and works. She also edited his writings and, probably, ghosted some of them. Summers were spent in a new house built in St Anthony while Grenfell worked up and down the coast. In the winters Grenfell lectured and raised money. Their two sons and a daughter were sent to boarding schools, so that they not be contaminated by hoi polloi of Newfoundland. Grenfell pretended not to notice that Anna was a full inch taller than he.

His reputation as a hero spread. A potted biography appeared as early as 1908. Books and articles flowed from his (and Anna's) pens. The press lionized him. Wilfred Grenfell, Master Mariner, by Basial Matthews, appeared in 1924 -- an oxymoron, perhaps, to anyone who had ever sailed under his erratic and adventurous captaincy.

The novelist Saul Bellow remembers how Grenfell's writings and reputation as a folk hero influenced his youthful years. He idealized the doctor in his Henderson The Rain King (1950).

Honorary degrees showered on him; in 1927 a KCMG transformed him into Sir Wilfred. His Lady readily gave up her American citizenship to become a subject of George V and the International Grenfell Association was formed.

His interests, goals and activities removed him farther and farther away from the entity which had given him his start, the Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen. Late in 1926, while lecturing and money-raising in London, he formed the Grenfell

Association of Great Britain and Ireland. Characteristically he didn't bother to inform either the IGA or the Mission about his initiative. When challenged by the Mission he became quite uppish and informed them that his work accomplished much more good and was much more important than theirs. After almost forty years Grenfell's association with the Mission reached an acrimonious end. It eventually turned over the Newfoundland and Labrador properties to the IGA.

Even in the depths of the depression - here I quote the biography by Ronald Rompkey (1959) the IGAS "operated six hospitals and seven nursing stations, the King George V Institute [a sort of a seamen's YMCA], four boarding schools and assorted 'industrial centers' greenhouses, clothing distribution stores, together with two hospital ships and assorted tenders, a supply schooner and a haul-up slip in St. Anthony. They maintained a permanent staff of fifty-seven and a pool of volunteers... They maintained experimental gardens, electric plants, animal husbandry... In short, they held almost total responsibility for the improvement of life in the region"(177-8).

An enterprise of such magnitude required, and received, efficient organization from the IGA. Grenfell no longer "wintered over". He and Anna had houses in Vermont and in a suburb of Boston and spent the winters in the southern US. He made his last coastal voyage in 1932. Still, he liked to keep his hand in. He dipped into the clothing store and complicated the inventory, he dropped off people at the hospital without giving (or knowing) their names and addresses, and he would invite notables on a cruise and neglect to alert the ship's officers. Someone always had to "clean up" after him - just as, earlier, the Mission had had to "pick up" after the young Wilf. Yet, though he might be a sore trial, he was loved and his irresponsibility forgiven.

I think that we would have found Grenfell to be very "clubbable" - genial, gregarious, full of stories. We would, however, have to rein in our charitable impulses and be very watchful over our pocketbooks. Keeping the experiences of the Mission and the IGA in mind, we also would not want to entrust him with the arduous and responsible duties of a Club office.

Grenfell's body began to fail him. He suffered two heart attacks in the 1920s and by the mid-thirties his heart was fibrillating dangerously. Soon a male nurse was required and Grenfell began to forget names and faces. His lecturing and fund-raising gradually came to an end. At Dr. Kellogg's sanitarium in Miami he underwent a treatment of vegetarian diet and massage. Anna had died of cancer in 1938. He brought his ashes to St. Anthony in the summer of 1939, his last visit to the great humanitarian enterprise he had founded almost fifty years earlier.

At his Vermont house on 9 October 1940 he played one last game of croquet - he lost - and died of a heart attack. Harry Emerson Fosdick presided over one of the many memorial services and his ashes were buried at St. Anthony.

In researching this paper I looked for the most recent scholarly work on Grenfell. Neither the University nor the public library had copies of Ronald Rompkey's biography (1959). Nor was the ever-helpful Duffenhofer's able to find a copy. Interlibrary loan located one at Youngstown State University and another at Eastern Tennessee University - inconvenient when one wants a source readily at hand for a last-minute check of facts and dates.

I quote Rompkey again (p. xiii). 1947 [seven years after Grenfell's death] as the Physician's Window in the north transcript of Washington National Cathedral was about to be finished, a staff member of the New England Grenfell Association telephoned a Boston Newspaper to announce the unveiling ceremony. "The right lancet commemorates Sir Wilfred Grenfell" the caller declared with some satisfaction. "Never heard of him" was the reply. "Well, Jesus Christ is in the middle" the exasperated caller shot back. "Have you ever heard of him?" After the Canadian Confederation absorbed Newfoundland the government assumed the functions that private enterprise had initiated. The medical services, the hospitals, the orphanage - the result of the seeds Grenfell had shown fifty-five years earlier - all became public responsibilities.

If today you travel to St. Anthony you may have the "Grenfell Experience". You can visit Wilfred's and Anna's house - now a museum - and the dock and the handicraft shop. There one may inspect, possibly buy, hooked rugs, tea cozies, local carvings and, of course, Grenfell cloth coats. The whole shebang is owned by The Grenfell Historic Properties and operated by the Sir Wilfred Thomason Grenfell Historical Society, a non profit membership-based organization. Donations are gratefully accepted. Even now the magnetism of the Grenfell name attracts dollars.

Almost every adult in St. Anthony earns his or her bread from a job with Grenfell Historic Properties. So, more than sixty years after his death, the people of St. Anthony, many of them descendants of the livyers, are still in the care of Wilf, the Labrador Doctor.