

Cod And God: Dr Wilfred Grenfell in Newfoundland

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ABSTRACT Wilfred Thomason Grenfell (1865–1940) began his medical career working for the National Mission for Deep Sea Fishermen on the North Sea. In 1892, the Mission sent him to Newfoundland to investigate the living and working conditions of the fishermen there. He spent most of his life improving conditions for the settlers on the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador. His unorthodox methods and difficult personality brought him into conflict with the authorities. In spite of this, he achieved significant changes for the Newfoundlanders in medical care, education and economic prospects.

KEYWORDS Deep sea fishing, Grenfell, medical charity, Newfoundland

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS National Mission for Deep Sea Fishermen (NMDSF)

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INTRODUCTION

In the late nineteenth century, Newfoundland was Britain's oldest colony, discovered by John Cabot in 1497. Perched uncomfortably at the mouth of the Gulf of St Lawrence, it was a land of fish, fur and fog.

The coasts of the Labrador are among the most dangerous in the world. The few charts which existed had been sketched by Captain Cook in the 1760s and had not been touched since. Apart from icebergs, shoals, sudden storms and the rugged coastline, there was the added danger of fog. The polar waters of the Labrador current flow south to meet the more temperate Gulf Stream on the Grand Banks just off Newfoundland. The resulting fogs are so thick and persistent that the traditional seafaring cry of 'Where are you bound?' was often abbreviated to: 'Where are you?'

Away from the capital of St John's, about 140,000 people lived along the shores of Newfoundland and Labrador – known collectively as 'the Labrador'. Most were of Scottish, Irish, and English origin and some were of French extraction. When asked what they did, they would simply reply: 'Live yere'. So these settlers became known as 'Livyeres'. There were also about 17,000 Inuit on the North coast of Labrador, and some nomadic American Indians.

There was only one occupation: fishing. The seas around the Labrador heaved with plaice, sole, turbot, caplin and herring. But these were fed to the dogs. When the Livyeres spoke of fish, they meant cod. For them, cod was God. Salted, dried and sent to the Catholic countries of Europe and South America, cod was a very lucrative

business. Between \$6–7 million a year poured into St John's from the cod fishing, making the merchants who owned the fishing boats very wealthy indeed.

For the Livyeres, it was a very different story. They owned nothing. Nets and equipment were hired out to them, the cost being recouped from their percentage of the profits from the fishing. The majority of trade on the Labrador was in the hands of the Hudson's Bay Company.¹ Their wages were paid in coloured counters which could only be redeemed at the Company's stores for sub-standard goods. If the fishing was good, the best the Livyeres could hope for was enough flour, molasses, cheap fat and tea to prevent them starving. If the fishing was poor, they starved.

Each May, once the ice had broken up, some 30,000 men, women and children converged on St John's, desperate for a place on one of the trawlers going 'down north'. There was no accommodation for them either in the town or on board. Whole families – including a goat which most families kept – lived on deck with scant food and fresh water and no sanitation or privacy. The women and children were landed at various points along the coast where they lived in make-shift huts. There they cleaned and dried the fish brought ashore by the men in a manner similar to that used in the Scottish herring fishing industry.²

Unlike British fishing fleets, the trawlers on the Labrador worked in isolation. Should the ship be damaged there was rarely anyone nearby to offer assistance. The merchants who owned the trawlers were also the magistrates so little attention was paid to legislation regarding the seaworthiness of a vessel. Being a fisherman

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on the Labrador was as close to slavery as anything could be. Then, in 1892, Wilfred Grenfell arrived on the Labrador and nothing would ever be the same.

WILFRED T GRENFELL

Wilfred Thomason Grenfell was born on 28 February, 1865, the second son of the Rev Algernon Grenfell, owner and headmaster of Mostyn House School near Parkgate, Cheshire. Most of Grenfell's childhood was spent playing on the perilous Sands of Dee, or sailing with local fishermen. At this stage, the hardships which they endured of necessity were for him merely a source of adventure.

At fourteen, he was sent to Marlborough College, Wiltshire, but even here, study came a poor second to sport. It wasn't that he excelled at any particular sport, but he had an intense competitiveness which tended to bludgeon the opposition regardless of skill. These days he might well be classed as hyperactive and kept away from sugary drinks. By dividing his time between sport and avoiding lessons, life passed pleasantly enough.

Then at eighteen, he received a nasty shock. His father wanted to know what he intended to do with the rest of his life. Grenfell's first choice – big game hunter – was rejected out of hand. In retaliation, Grenfell rejected all other suggestions. All he knew was that he didn't want to follow any of the traditional family careers in the Army, the Church or teaching. In desperation, he was packed off to speak to a successful local doctor. It wasn't the impressive house or the smart carriage with well-matched horses which did the trick. Seated in the doctor's study, mesmerised by a specimen of a pickled brain, Grenfell decided that he would study to be a doctor.

Perhaps 'study' isn't the right word. In his second year at the London Hospital, he attended four out of sixty lectures. Even these he disrupted by spilling carbon disulphide, releasing pigeons or firing peas at the professor.³

He was saved from expulsion by the intervention of Frederick Treves,⁴ a gifted surgeon who, unusually for the times, followed Joseph Lister's concepts of antiseptics and insisted that everyone in his theatre should scrub their hands with a nail brush. Treves achieved fame in the early twentieth century by successfully performing an appendectomy on the new King Edward VII. Not only was he a successful and innovative surgeon and excellent tutor, he was, crucially for his tearaway pupil, a very keen sportsman. Here at last was an authority figure whom Grenfell could respect. Finally he began to settle into his studies.

The London Hospital received patients from the most deprived areas of the East End: Tilbury Docks, Wapping, Billingsgate, Bethnal Green, Jack the Ripper territory where squalid poverty and casual violence were commonplace. It

was here that Grenfell saw the effects of alcohol first hand and developed a lifelong abhorrence of alcohol.⁵

Unusually for the times, he did not blame the drinker but the living conditions which made alcohol appear an acceptable palliative.

Returning one night from a medical case in Shadwell when he was just twenty, he came across a large tent in which a noisy meeting was in progress. He stepped in to see what all the fuss was about.

The speaker was Dwight L Moody, a well known American evangelist. Listening to his exuberant style, Grenfell was fired up as he had never been before. In his childhood, religion had consisted of the twice-on-Sunday trudge to church where he had leavened the lump of a tedious sermon by cooking chocolates on the steam pipes. He wrote later:

'The ordinary exponents of the Christian faith never succeeded in interesting me ... I considered it effeminate'.⁶

In evangelism, he found the 'manly Christianity' which embodied so many of his own values:

'In reality the terms "Christian" and "good sportsman" are synonymous'.⁷

He went to hear Moody speak again and described this second meeting as 'crossing the Rubicon'.⁸

Now he really had his work cut out. Between sports and lectures he organised Sunday Schools and summer camps for boys who had known nothing but neglect and abuse. With like-minded fellow students, he did missionary work on the East End streets and in basement lodging houses.

Against all expectations, Grenfell passed his finals in 1887 but he never shone very brightly. Even his mentor Treves assessed him as 'indifferent' and in anaesthetics (rather worryingly) as 'very poor'. In these circumstances, it was unlikely that he would succeed in private practice. In the absence of a better alternative, Treves suggested that Grenfell should join the National Mission for Deep Sea Fishermen.

NATIONAL MISSION FOR DEEP SEA FISHERMEN

The National Mission for Deep Sea Fishermen was originally formed to provide assistance to the fishermen

of Britain. Fishing in nineteenth century Britain was not for the faint-hearted. The North Sea is shallow and subject to fierce storms. Some 200 men were killed or drowned each year. The crews mostly consisted of deserters,



FIGURE 1 Map of Newfoundland in relation to Eastern Canada. Courtesy of RCPE Library.

convicts and the desperate unemployed.⁹ The only thing they had in common was their ignorance of fishing and sailing a boat. Boys as young as twelve were apprenticed from orphanages and reform schools. With no relatives to ask awkward questions, they were often treated appallingly. There might be 20,000 men out in the North Sea spending up to twelve weeks in crowded, airless accommodation with no bunks or washing facilities.

Tuberculosis, arthritis, rheumatic fever and ulcers were the common ailments which could rob a man of his livelihood and send him to the workhouse where conditions were little better than those he left behind. No wonder they snatched what pleasure they could from the copers (floating 'grog shops') which brought tobacco, alcohol and women out to the fishing fleets.

On shore, the situation was little better. Just as small towns rapidly became industrialised cities, so fishing villages expanded to become large sea ports with the attendant problems of shoddy housing, over-crowding, social deprivation and unrest.

Into this maelstrom of human misery came the NMDSF in 1882 bringing a practical Christianity. Cheap tobacco tempted the hard bitten fishermen to board the Mission vessels. Once there, they were given books, warm clothing and a non-judgmental friendship which encouraged them to come again.

It quickly became apparent that the men's physical health was in even more urgent need of attention than their spiritual welfare. And so, in 1887, the Mission set up a

medical department, with Treves as chairman, to provide hospital ships and qualified doctors to go out to the fishing fleets. Grenfell was an ideal candidate for such work and he joined the NMDSF in 1888 on a salary of £300 per year.

Transferring patients onto the hospital ship with ice and snow covering the decks, nursing pleurisy in damp, airless cabins, and stitching a cut lip on board a rolling trawler during a storm, were all challenges which he relished almost as much as depriving the copers of their trade.

At first, his boisterous behaviour made it hard for him to befriend the more reticent fishermen. But if he gave a sermon it was in the nature of a yarn and if his singing was more enthusiastic than tuneful he wasn't on his own. Soon, his youth and fitness and willingness to turn his hand to any task won them over and he set about putting more into their lives than just alcohol.

He organised a Better Writing Association and regularly wrote to the orphans at sea. He met them when they came ashore and encouraged them to take part in sports and summer camps. He formed a brass band for the fishermen and persuaded the then Duke of Edinburgh to present the instruments. He set up a Fishermen's Institute at Yarmouth, somewhere clean, comfortable, friendly and above all alcohol-free where the men could stay instead of the insalubrious pubs and lodging houses.

These were significant achievements for a young man of twenty-three. Unfortunately, he never bothered to inform the Mission of what he was doing. More than

once, the Mission trustees found themselves committed to heavy expenditure, regardless of whether the funds were available or not. Grenfell brusquely dismissed any protests. The work needed to be done; the logistics were someone else's problem.

Attempting to turn poacher into gamekeeper, the Mission appointed Grenfell as Superintendent in 1889, but this appointment proved to be a double-edged sword. First, he was off round the Hebrides following the herring fleets as far as the Orkneys. Then he continued on to Ireland where his brand of evangelism upset the local priests, and then back up to Aberdeen before sailing down the east coast to Yarmouth. It was as much as the Mission could do to keep up with him without listening to the faint appeals for help which were drifting across the Atlantic from Newfoundland.

Then, in 1892, tragedy tipped the balance. Two hundred men set out from Trinity Bay, East Newfoundland, for the fishing and ran into a blizzard. Their boat became trapped in ice and was crushed, forcing them to abandon ship. They were stranded on the ice being driven out to sea by the storm. Forty men froze to death.¹⁰

Suddenly, everyone wanted to know about the Newfoundland fishermen. The Lord Mayor of London opened a fund for the widows and orphans of the tragedy; Queen Victoria contributed. Newspapers took up the story, asking awkward questions about Britain's responsibilities towards its oldest colony. The Government of Newfoundland, comfortably autonomous for so long, now felt the harsh glare of public criticism. People were demanding that 'something must be done'. The Mission decided to send Grenfell on an expedition to ascertain the true state of the conditions on the Labrador.

GRENFELL IN NEWFOUNDLAND

Grenfell arrived in St John's in the summer of 1892 to find the town a smouldering ruin after a disastrous fire had demolished most of the buildings. This was perhaps not the sort of warm welcome he had been hoping for. After helping to tend the injured, he set off up the coast. For Grenfell, it was love at first sight:

'The large and lofty island its top covered in green verdure ... its peaks capped with fleecy mist of early morning, rose in a setting of purest azure blue ... the faces of its ruddy cliffs, their ledges picked out with the homes of myriad birds. Its feet were bathed in the dark, rich green sea of the Atlantic water edged by the line of pure white breakers ... evoking peals of thunder ... the great schools of whales ... the shoals of fish ... suggested that the whole vast ocean was too small to hold its riches.'¹¹

He found the extreme poverty of the Liveyeres less

enthralling:

'... one window of odd fragments of glass. The floor was of pebbles from the beach; the earth walls were damp and chilling. There were half a dozen rude wooden bunks built in tiers around the single room and a group of some six neglected children ... were huddled together in one corner. A very sick man was coughing his soul out in the darkness of a lower bunk, while a pitifully clad woman gave him cold water to sip out of a spoon. There was no furniture except a small stove with an iron pipe leading through a hole in the roof.'¹²

Flour sacks were the usual form of clothing. The children went barefoot. Whole families died of pneumonia because they had no food or fuel. Their diet – when they had anything – was salt fish and hard biscuit. With the snow melting in June and the ice forming again in September, there was no time to grow vegetables or fruit. There were no dairy products because there were no cows, just a few goats.

Tuberculosis, beriberi, flu, typhoid and dysentery wreaked havoc in these communities. People died of gangrene because they lacked the means to clean simple wounds. Toothache could lead to necrosis of the lower jaw. An ingrowing toenail could incapacitate someone for years.

All that short summer of 1892, Grenfell sailed up and down the coast, visiting isolated communities, treating the sick, distributing clothes and blankets, and holding simple religious services until the bemused Liveyeres remarked:

'Them be good men whom ever they be.'¹³

The next summer, Grenfell was back again, bringing with him two more doctors and two nurses. The plan was to build two cottage hospitals on the Labrador: one at Battle Harbour on the Straits of Belle Isle, and the other at Indian Harbour on Hamilton Inlet, further up the coast. Grenfell, always restless, left the mundane work of setting up the hospitals to his colleagues while he sailed as far north as he could, charting the coasts and waters as he went.

He knew nothing about the coast or the dangerous currents and fiercely unpredictable weather. He knew little about sailing and even less about navigation. He considered these to be minor problems which could be overcome with a little enthusiasm. He outraged the captain of the ship by taking the helm, jeopardising not only the ship but the lives of the passengers. More than once he had to be rescued by local Inuit. Once, when attempting to make a dramatic full speed entrance to Battle Harbour, he caused \$1,500 worth of damage to the ship. More seriously, with the Mission ship out of commission, many outlying communities had no medical care that summer. Grenfell, as usual, continued on his way,

leaving others to pick up the pieces.

It was becoming clear that the Livyeres' problems were so serious that medical care alone was not enough. Grenfell identified three problems which must be addressed before there could be any hope of a lasting improvement in living conditions:

- 1 The 'truck' system whereby people were paid in sub-standard goods nowhere near the value of the work given.
- 2 Lack of alternative employment which might provide extra income through the winter and when the fishing was poor.
- 3 Church schools where each denomination provided its own school. 'Religion is tied up in bundles and its energies used to divide rather than to unite man,' Grenfell declared. He proposed non-denominational schools where all children could acquire the skills necessary to improve their living standards.¹⁴

This plan quickly changed the attitude of the merchants and government officials towards Grenfell. At first they had applauded his work providing medical care for the fishermen. Now it seemed he was moving away from charitable work and embarking on business ventures which would encourage the Livyeres to think independently. Even the Livyeres were dubious of such a formidable challenge.¹⁵

Typically, Grenfell ignored all these reservations and carried on with his project. Andrew Carnegie was persuaded to donate 3,000 books for a travelling library. The children earned their education by performing tasks for the Mission or for their own communities. In order to free the fishermen from the 'truck' system, he encouraged them to form their own co-operatives. The first was at Red Bay, one of the poorest settlements. The success of its co-operative was made possible by a consignment of food that was washed ashore from a wrecked ship. This enabled the community to survive until the co-operative was fully functional.

Where such an opportunity did not present, Grenfell used his own money to get the co-operatives started. He took pelts from the trappers and sold them to the merchants who wouldn't dare offer him the 75 cents which they normally paid for a \$40 fur. With this money the trapper could buy his own equipment and work independently.

1894 proved a testing time for everyone on the Labrador. The Newfoundland banking system failed and there was rioting in the town. Businesses which were just recovering from the fire two years previously went bankrupt. The traders who owned the trawlers were also directors of the failed banks and were in no position to supply boats for the fishing, which meant that there was no work for the Livyeres. The problem was academic; that year the ice

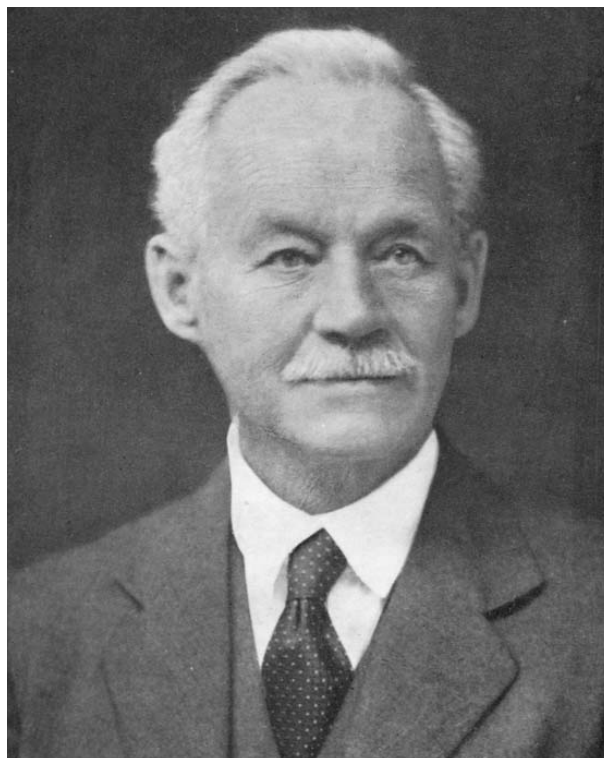


FIGURE 2 Sir Wilfred Grenfell. Courtesy of RCPE Library.

didn't melt until September – when it was already beginning to freeze again. Repeated storms drove the fish away and made sailing impossible. To make matters worse, the hospital at Indian Harbour was badly damaged by fire.

In view of the hardship caused by these adverse conditions, it was decided that the hospital at Battle Harbour would remain open during the winter. Grenfell badly wanted to be the first doctor to over-winter on the Labrador. However, the Mission felt that their Superintendent should pay more attention to the problems facing fishing communities in Britain. Grand Banks or Dogger Bank, the adverse conditions that year had caused hardship for all fishermen and their families. Besides, many of the projects initiated by Grenfell were outwith the remit of the Mission. With some justification, the trustees were complaining about the expense.

Grenfell's response was to set out on a fundraising tour of Canada and the US. It was a huge success. He was a natural orator and the wealthy and influential people who came to hear him had, more often than not, begun their careers as penniless pioneers. All across North America he left a trail of committees dedicated to raising funds for 'Dr Grenfell's work.'¹⁶

This didn't go down too well with the Mission. They had expended considerable sums on the Labrador only for their Superintendent to claim sole credit for their achievements. When the trustees remonstrated with him, this thirty-year-old man sulked and threw tantrums like an adolescent. Like parents at the end of their tether, the

Mission laid down a few rules. From now on, the Mission's work on the Labrador would be entrusted to steadier people. Grenfell must see to his duties in Britain. This firmness was perhaps encouraged by the fact that in 1896, the NMDSF had been granted a Royal Charter and was now the Royal National Mission for Deep Sea Fishermen.

FISHING IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Major changes in the fishing industry were taking place in the latter years of the nineteenth century. Sail and wood had been replaced by steam and steel. The boats stayed out for no more than a week and the Mission ships were no longer needed. Grenfell turned his formidable energies shorewards. The copers were gone but the pubs were not. He founded Fishermen's Institutes at Milford Haven, Fleetwood and Aberdeen, providing games and entertainment as well as accommodation and low priced food. He campaigned for pensions for fishermen who could no longer go to sea. He wrote a book called *Vikings of Today* – the first of many books and articles he would write. In an unusual gesture of conciliation, he donated the proceeds to the Mission. All the while, he travelled throughout Britain raising funds for his beloved Labrador. Finally, in 1899, he was given permission to return to the Labrador.

In his absence, the co-operative at Red Bay had thrived, yielding a 5% dividend; food prices had fallen and the price of fish had risen. It was a matter for comment that now no-one starved. Encouraged by this success, other communities formed their own co-operatives. A third hospital had been built at Harrington and there were nursing stations along the coast. This success generated a need for a base hospital where valuable resources could be pooled.

The most logical place was St Anthony on the northern tip of Newfoundland. It was a natural gathering place for trawlers and often in the summer the harbour was crammed with hundreds of boats. Grenfell was a firm believer in self-help and set the locals to building their own hospital, himself dragging timber on his dog sled. He persuaded the Newfoundland Government to pledge \$1,500 a year for medical costs and he pledged Mission funds for maintenance. Needless to say, he omitted to inform the Mission.

Officially, the new hospital wasn't opened until 1905 but it was operational long before then. Each mail steamer disgorged at least fifty patients from all along the Straits of Belle Isle. From toothache to tumours; public health to market gardening, the staff tackled anything. A non-denominational school and orphanage were built where children who had never even seen toys were encouraged to play as well as learn.

Some of Grenfell's methods went far beyond the merely

unorthodox. At one Boston fundraiser, he 'auctioned' three orphans to foster homes. He picked up neglected or abandoned children and deposited them in St Anthony with no idea of where he had found them, what their names were, or even if they still had relatives. Grenfell ignored the protests of the orphanage staff. He'd done his bit; the rest was up to someone else.

Thanks to his lecture tours of North America and Britain, volunteers were flocking to the Labrador. Specialists spent their vacations giving their service free for the Livyeres. Other volunteers chopped wood, dug ditches, collected fuel, crewed boats, taught and acted as hospital assistants.

Yet, while the sole occupation continued to be fishing, starvation was still only one bad summer away. So Grenfell put into action his plan for diversification:

- 1 **Tourism.** Visitors – and their money – would be attracted by salmon and trout fishing.
- 2 **Mining.** For the attractive Labradorite¹⁷ which could be made into jewellery and sold.
- 3 **Timber mills.** To prepare wood for housing and newsprint.
- 4 **Cottage industries.** Weaving, making gloves, moccasins and boots.
- 5 **Bottling of native fruits.** Blueberries, cloudberry and squash berries grew in great profusion and could provide much needed vitamins.
- 6 **Reindeer herding.** The animals would supply meat, milk and transport.

This last was not an unqualified success. The reindeer, shipped from Lapland, were too slow for transport but quick enough to escape from their compounds. The Laplanders who came with the animals refused to stay, claiming that Newfoundland was far too cold for them.

As the Livyeres had little money, Grenfell used his own savings to initiate these projects. This involvement in the co-ops led to accusations of profiteering and embarrassed the Mission whose charitable status was placed at risk. In criticising the Newfoundland Government for failing to address the Livyeres' problems, the government felt that he damaged their reputation and suggested that he return to Britain to address the problems of poverty in the industrialised cities there.¹⁸

The Mission's finances now became extremely confused. A great deal of money was being collected by local committees and sent to the Labrador. Some of the donations were intended for a specific purpose such as a new hospital ship or equipment for the orphanage or a teacher's wages. Disregarding everyone else's wishes, Grenfell spent the money as he felt necessary. He kept no records of any transactions and had no accounting skills.¹⁹ It was impossible for the Mission to trace where and how the donations had been spent. Grenfell's attitude did not

help matters. As long as the money benefited the Livyeres, he couldn't see that there was a problem. It was easy for his detractors in the Newfoundland Government to accuse him of fraud and mismanagement as well as evasion of customs duties. The Mission felt it advisable to appoint an accountant to keep records of all donations and transactions. Grenfell refused to work with the man and then accused the Mission of not helping him.

These animosities did not affect Grenfell's popularity. In 1906, he was made a Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of St Michael and St George. The following year, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Medicine from Oxford University – the first awarded by that university. In America, the National Academy of Social Sciences welcomed him into their very limited membership.

Then, in 1908, it almost ended in tragedy. On Easter Sunday, he and his dog team fell through weak ice and spent twenty-four hours on an ice pan drifting out to sea. He was rescued purely by chance when a group of men saw a black speck on an ice pan and rowed out to investigate. Coming so close to death was not a humbling experience for Grenfell. In his own account of the incident,²⁰ he is pleased and proud of his adventure even though it had been caused by his own foolhardiness in trying to take a short cut across ice which had been seriously weakened by the Spring sunshine.

After this, he became even more of a liability. He employed two doctors for the same post, invited important people to St Anthony and then forgot about them, careful plans which had taken others months to prepare were dismissed on a whim. Other people's achievements were upstaged by a dramatic gesture or prank of his own. When things went wrong, he blamed others.

Then, in May, 1909, travelling from Britain to the US on the *Mauretania*, he met a Chicago heiress twenty years his junior. In November of the same year, Wilfred Grenfell married Anne Elizabeth Caldwell MacClanahan and they set up home in St Anthony.

It must have been quite a culture shock for the young lady but she rose to the challenge magnificently. As well as managing her husband, she took over a lot of the fund-raising duties and introduced a more formal way of living. She even learned to make artificial flowers so that she could pass on the skill to the women of Newfoundland.²¹ But she never really enjoyed living in St Anthony and was even less happy on her infrequent trips up the coast. However, she did enjoy rubbing shoulders with famous people such as Shackleton and Marconi, as well as King Edward VII and President Theodore Roosevelt.

None of the adulation for Grenfell could disguise the fact that the Mission's finances were now in a hopeless mess. By 1911, concerns were being expressed by other doctors

in the Labrador Mission regarding poor administration and lack of proper organisation. Grenfell was accused of using the hospital ships to take visitors along the coast, of evasion of customs duties, and of mismanagement of thousands of dollars.²² An independent audit by Price Waterhouse cleared Grenfell of any wrongdoing but his naivety had allowed others to embezzle Mission funds. The audit suggested that the accounts should be organised on a permanent and professional basis.²³ The International Grenfell Association was formed to take full responsibility for the Labrador Mission and Grenfell was now merely Medical Superintendent.

He might well have seen the outbreak of war in 1914 as another chance to set off on a jolly adventure. There was probably also an element of competition. Some doctors and nurses had already left the Mission to join the armed forces and Grenfell wanted to do likewise. But he was now approaching fifty and there were younger, fitter doctors flocking to France and Flanders.

Eventually he got what he wanted. In 1915, he joined the Harvard University Medical Unit and left for France where he made a valuable contribution to the welfare of the troops. He was experienced in treating the effects of cold, wet conditions and he was one of the few people to recognise 'shell shock' as a psychological condition.

He didn't enjoy the experience as much as he'd expected. Military discipline was too restrictive for his taste. Even he had to admit that war was not the *Boys' Own* adventure he was looking for. He lasted a year and then returned to England, where his wife was involved in voluntary work, and then back to the Labrador.

Even here, things were changing. The children whom Grenfell had sent away to be educated were now returning as nurses, teachers, engineers and carpenters. The Newfoundlanders – no longer 'Livyeres' – had more control over their own lives. The pioneer spirit was giving way to a more solid professionalism.

For Grenfell, the honours still kept coming. Early in his career on the Labrador, he was made a Justice of the Peace – as were others doctors who followed him. He was knighted in 1927 – the same year that a new concrete hospital was opened in St Anthony replacing the original wooden structure. Two years later he was installed as Lord Rector of St Andrews University. He was awarded the Livingstone Gold Medal and became a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. He refused the post of Governor of Newfoundland.

He was now over sixty and had suffered his first heart attack in 1926. The youthful enthusiasm and boundless energy which had achieved so much settled into an abrasive quality. He was doing God's work; to question him was to question God. Still he had the energy to target

British businessmen, trying to interest them in investing in the Labrador with such projects as mining for mineral deposits, harvesting timber, building hydroelectric complexes, and an air terminal for the budding transatlantic air travel.

One of his lecture tours to Burnley in 1922 was attended by a Lancashire mill owner called Walter Haythornthwaite. He listened intently as Grenfell described the ideal cloth for Labrador clothing: water resistant and wind proof, light but strong. Afterwards he designed a cloth from 100% Egyptian cotton which was so closely woven (600 threads per inch) that it was difficult to dye it. He sent a sample to Grenfell who approved it and suggested that it be called Grenfell cloth. A different personality might have suggested an alternative name – Labrador Cloth, for example. It was evidently effective; Edmund Hillary used it on his successful ascent of Everest in 1953.

By now, his health and that of his wife was failing. He suffered a second heart attack in 1929 and a cerebrovascular accident in 1932. Anne was suffering from cancer. They left St Anthony and went to live by Lake Champerlain in Vermont. Here Anne died in 1938.

On 9 October, 1940, as The Battle of Britain raged in the skies over his home country, Grenfell played a game of draughts with his grown-up children – and lost. Still highly competitive, he stomped off in high dudgeon for a nap before dinner and died in his room aged 75. His ashes were taken back to St Anthony where they were interred in a rock face above the hospital. The place is marked by a simple plaque engraved with the words:

‘Life is a field of honour.’

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CONCLUSION

What are we to make of this man who was such a hero to so many and a total nightmare to others?

Under a veneer of effortless amateurism, he was competitive beyond his capabilities, energetic to the point of mania, egocentric and immature. In spite of all this – maybe because of it – he transformed life for thousands of people and for generations to come. Impossible to work with, his personal charm, charisma and enthusiasm brought people flocking to work with him. He was the antithesis of a team player yet spent his life in the service of others. There was room for only one project in his life but that one received his absolute and undivided attention.

He had a relaxed attitude to religion, despising the sectarianism which he saw as divisive and destructive. At the same time, he compared himself to Jesus Christ, a fisher of men who worked among the poor and dispossessed. He was a physician, surgeon, magistrate, explorer, missionary, lecturer and writer. More than all these things, he was a social reformer – some might say a revolutionary, an agent for profound change who delighted in taking the old order, established for 400 years, turning it upside down and giving it a good shake. He provided far more than just medical care or education. He gave back to the disenfranchised control of their own lives, empowering them to make a better future for themselves. By their very nature, such reformers are never easy to live with.

Today, Newfoundland has a coastguard vessel and a university college which bear Grenfell's name. There is a statue of him in St John's and another in front of the hospital at St Anthony.²⁴ It's a pity he's not better remembered in Britain.

- 11 Grenfell W. *A Labrador doctor*. London: Hodder and Stoughton; 1929; 83.
- 12 *Ibid.*; 84.
- 13 Kerr JL; 80.
- 14 Grenfell W. *A Labrador doctor*; 246.
- 15 Grenfell W. *Labrador's fight for economic freedom*; 17.
- 16 *Ibid.*; 106.
- 17 Labradorite – a type of Feldspar, which reflects light in iridescent shades of blue, red and gold.
- 18 Rompkey R. *Grenfell of Labrador*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; 1991; 123.
- 19 *Ibid.*; 91.
- 20 Grenfell W. *Adrift on an Ice Pan*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.; 1909.
- 21 Rompkey R.; 179.
- 22 *Ibid.*; 167.
- 23 *Ibid.*; 168.
- 24 *Ibid.*; xiii.