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## L'origine de la description d'un iglou inuit du Labrador par William Richardson en 1771

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### Article abstract

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## Notes de recherche / Research notes

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# The origin of William Richardson's 1771 description of a Labrador Inuit snow house

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Marianne P. Stopp\*

**Résumé:** L'origine de la description d'un iglou inuit du Labrador par William Richardson en 1771

Les chercheurs qui étudient l'histoire des Inuit du Labrador connaissent depuis longtemps le bref compte rendu qu'a fait William Richardson de son voyage de 1771 au sud du Labrador, et sa description détaillée d'un iglou. Cet note de recherche compare cette description au texte de George Cartwright sur le même sujet afin de montrer que les informations de Richardson dérivent de Cartwright. Bien que l'iglou de Richardson soit correctement décrit, il s'agit néanmoins d'information secondaire. Cette comparaison montre également l'importance de faire la différence entre des informations vérifiables et la spéculation ou, dans ce cas-ci, la répétition et la façon dont un récit historique peut facilement avoir l'apparence d'une source primaire.

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Researchers of Labrador Inuit history have long known of William Richardson's brief account of his 1771 voyage to southern Labrador and his detailed description of a snow house. This research note compares this description to George Cartwright's text on the same subject to show that Richardson's information derives from Cartwright's. Although Richardson correctly describes a snow house, it is nevertheless secondary information. The comparison also shows the importance of differentiating verifiable information from speculation or, in this case, replication and how easily an historical narrative can take on the appearance of a primary source.

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## Introduction

Three of the earliest, detailed descriptions of a Labrador Inuit snow house were made in southern Labrador in 1771. During his first winter in Labrador, George Cartwright made a record of a snow house he had visited (1792: entry of 26 February 1771), and a few months later, on 2 June 1771, described it again in a letter sent from Labrador to Anthony Eyre, a friend of the Cartwright family and a neighbouring landowner in Nottinghamshire (Stopp 2009: 207). William Richardson, a young master's mate under Michael Lane on the *Grenville*, has also been credited for his description of an Inuit snow house, or *aneo-Iggilo* as he called it, recorded in his short journal account of a 1771 voyage to southern Labrador (Richardson 1935: 58). Of some historical interest is the fact that all three descriptions are of the same structure, namely the snow house of the Inuk Attuiok, built in the winter of 1770-1771 at Lyon Head, at the mouth of the Charles River, St. Lewis Inlet. Scholars of Labrador ethnohistory have long known of Richardson's description, which is so detailed that its origin has never been questioned. This research note sets out to show that Richardson's text is not an eyewitness account but is based on George Cartwright's description. Attuiok's snow house acquires significance as a study in source criticism, in distinguishing primary from secondary source material, and in historiographical reliability.

## Richardson's legacy

William Richardson's naval career brought him to Labrador waters on at least six occasions, twice on vessels of Governor Hugh Palliser's squadron, and four times on vessels charged with preparing the coastal charts begun by James Cook in 1763 and completed by Michael Lane in 1772. He died of unknown causes on 20 July 1772, at about the age of 26. His small but unique legacy to Labrador studies is in the holdings of the University of Toronto Libraries. It includes a brief journal written ca. 1771 (Richardson 1935) that has served as source material for scholars of Labrador history for many decades. When the author recently re-examined the Richardson holding, a vocabulary of 92 Labrador Inuttitut entries was found as well as a rare early drawing of York Fort dated to 1769, and a self-portrait by Richardson (Stopp in press). All four items are in the form of black and white photographic copies of passable quality, and the location of the originals remains unknown.

## Cartwright, Richardson, and Attuiok

In the autumn of 1771, the *Grenville* under Master Michael Lane with William Richardson as master's mate visited British merchant adventurer George Cartwright at his home, Ranger Lodge, near the mouth of the Charles River. Lane had just completed the cartography of the coastline from Spotted Island northward, and the sojourn in St. Lewis Inlet was to prepare for the homeward crossing (Cartwright 1792, entries from 28 September to 8 October 1771; Skelton and Tooley 1967: Table B). Throughout this 10-day period there was nearly constant communication between Cartwright and the men of the *Grenville*: Cartwright spent a total of three nights on board ship; Lane

offered Cartwright the services of his carpenter to help with repairs to buildings and a wherry; the ship's surgeon, Mr. Campbell, administered medicine to Cartwright's long-time employee, Charles Atkinson; both Richardson and Campbell accompanied Cartwright to his traps and slips at a place called Lyon Neck, not far from where Attuiock had built his snow house the previous winter; and Lane's parting gift to Cartwright was 40 pounds of pickled beef, pork, and neat's (cow's) tongue. Richardson, moreover, spent three nights at Ranger Lodge with Cartwright.

Attuiock was an Inuk who had developed a close relationship with Cartwright, settling near his establishment in St. Lewis Inlet and hunting for him. The Inuk, along with his two wives, three young children, a brother, a nephew, and a "maidservant," was brought to St. Lewis Inlet in 1770 by Cartwright's business partner Francis Lucas from "Auchbucktoke," very likely "Ogbucktoke" or today's Hopedale area (Cartwright 1792: entry for 5 October 1770; Taylor 1974: 13). Lucas described Attuiock as a "chief" of a "tribe" of Inuit, and it was Attuiock and some of his extended family whom Cartwright took to England in the autumn of 1772 (Stopp 2009; Stopp and Mitchell 2010). Upon arriving in St. Lewis Inlet, the Inuit first lived in a wooden house of European construction, which proved to be cold and "too bad to live in." One of the children died there, and the family was starving because they were too far within the bay for good seal hunting. Cartwright ordered his men to repair "an old Canadian house" for the Inuit that dated to the pre-1763 French period and was further out in the bay. This remained their home until a snow house was built at Lyon Head sometime that winter near the mouth of the Charles River (Cartwright 1792: various entries in autumn 1770).

Early descriptions of Inuit winter life in southern Labrador are few, and most begin to appear in print in the early 1900s. The main source of information on early southern Labrador is George Cartwright's journal, which nevertheless has fewer entries on Inuit than one might wish. In northern Labrador, Moravian records begin in the same year as the texts considered here, in 1771, and form a much more substantial ethnohistorical record. One of the earliest Moravians to experience a snow house first-hand was William Turner, who in 1780 accompanied a group of Inuit to a caribou hunting camp west of Nain, although his account tells us little about the structure (Taylor 1969).

The snow house descriptions discussed here add to the historical ethnography of the region, and to a picture of Inuit winter life that in the 1770s was still largely unaffected by European settlement and intermarriage. Another type of cold season dwelling used by Labrador Inuit was the sod house, a construction of stone, wood, and sod. When the author recently conducted archaeological investigations of two sod houses in St. Lewis Inlet dating to the 1770s, and two sod houses in St. Michael's Bay dated ca. 1500-1760, their architectural layout was found to be similar to that of Attuiock's snow house, described below. This in turn has interesting implications for further analysis of space, of cultural or kin connections over time in the region, and further comparative work with the rest of Labrador and the eastern Arctic.

### The three snow house descriptions

The three descriptions of Attuiock's snow house are presented here as they appear in the original texts, without correction of syntax or spelling. A discussion of their similarities and differences follows with particular emphasis on their historiographical value and the identification of primary versus secondary texts.

Cartwright's journal entry of 26 February 1771, describing Attuiock's snow house, was written four months before his letter to Anthony Eyre and seven months before the *Grenville's* arrival in St. Lewis Inlet. It was edited by Cartwright in preparation for the journal's 1792 publication and does not contain the poor sentence structure and misspellings found in the letter to Eyre, which is probably closer to what appeared in Cartwright's original, handwritten journal (yet to be found):

This curious habitation was hollowed out of a drift bank of snow, in form of an oven; the length is about twelve feet, the width ten, and the height seven. Across the farther end was raised a platform of snow. On this were laid some boards, where the whole family slept upon bedding, composed of a considerable number of deerskins; which are both soft and warm. There was a curious window in the roof, fronting the bed; which was nearly three feet square, and made of a piece of transparent ice, shaved to a proper substance. It admitted a perfectly good light, and was secured in its place by strewing the edges with snow, and sprinkling that snow with water. On each side was a small pedestal of snow, for the support of a couple of lamps, which gave a sufficient light by night, and added to much heat to that occasioned by the breath of the Indians, as to make the house entirely warm: I was even obliged to open my waistcoat for a while. This heat also thawed the roof and sides sufficiently to enable the external frost, and natural coldness of the snow, to form innumerable small icicles. These different concretions from the reflection of the lamps made the apartment glitter with the appearance of radiant diamonds, or luminous crystallizations. The lamps were formed of stone, which they contrive to hollow out properly for this purpose; and the wicks, (for each had several laid in a row on the edge of the lamp) were bits of a particular kind of moss, well dried. Having first poured some oil into the lamp they then spit a small number of small pieces of fat upon a stick, and place them horizontally, at such a distance behind the wicks, that their heat melts the fat, equal to the consumption of oil. The door was a block of thick ice which they laid upon the inside of that aperture. From the door was a descent of four steps into a porch, which was sixteen feet long, four feet wide at the bottom next the house, but narrowed towards the outer end till it was but just sufficient for them to enter at, where it was quite open. It was built of large, oblong blocks of snow laid one upon another, and meeting at the top, which was ten feet high. By the entrance of the house projecting forward into the porch, and the steps before it, any person might walk in without stooping (Cartwright 1792: entry for 26 February 1771).

Cartwright's letter to Anthony Eyre, Esq., 2 June 1771, is very similar to the journal entry, but less edited:

Twas exactly of the shape of an oven with the mouth rather leaning outwards for the conveniency of entrance, which had a long porch before it. The latter was made of square pieces of snow cut with a handsaw & water poured over the seams, which instantly freezing made it perfectly wind and weather proof: the former was ha[cked out] of the snow with an adze and a square hole cut out over the door for a wi[ndow] on which was laid a flat,

transparent piece of ice, shaved very thin with [a] knife & cemented with water. The roof also being not above a foot thick admit[ted] so much light that it was by much the lightest apartment I ever was in, & had a particular brilliancy from the numberless small icicles formed by their breath; and without any fire 'twas warm enough for the tenderest person I know to live in. You ascended into it by steps which made the entrance easy without stooping altho' the door was not above two feet square. Somewhat about one half of the floor was left chair height above the rest & was covered with deerskins on which they slept & sat and exactly fronting the door, which was stopt at night with a piece of ice made to fit exactly to raise the degree of warmth. On either side the door was a lamp fixed on sticks. The curiosity & excellent contrivance of these lamps was well worth notice and I would [describe it for] your satisfaction. It was a large, thick flat stone hollowed [like a] soup-plate towards one edge, decreasing to nothing on the other, [paper damage] shelving towards them, the oil all settled in the deep part, in which [was laid a] small bit of dry moss of a particular sort, plentiful enough on [paper damage]. That was their wick: across the lamp some small matter higher than the wick & a little behind it was placed a small stick over which hung a number of small rashers of Seal's fat which gently melting with the heat of the wick dropped down & supplied the consumption of oil. Each wife had her lamp & under them upon the floor lay Seal's carcasses which they got from our crew & eat either raw or boiled; nor did a piece which they trampled underfoot for a week come amiss to them (in Stopp 2008: 207-208).

Richardson's description of Attuiock's snow house is as follows:

When the frost sett in, and the snow had fallen a good Depth, the Indians made themselves a snow house for the winter. Very strange indeed! A house made of snow! Yes veritabily made of Snow, without either stone or wood – this house then the Indians call aneo-Iggilo, which literally is a snow house. They always make them proportional to the number of the Family that is to inhabit them, as there is never (in the winter) want of materials to build of. Their shape in the inside is half a sphere as near as they can make them; this is executed by cutting a gap down (where the snow is pretty deep) and as soon as that is low enough they form a hole exactly two feet square for the house door, in at which they cut away with adzes and axes till they shape the inside of the house; the floor of which is on a level with this hole; and half of the floor opposite to this hole is two feet above the rest, and is for sitting or sleeping on. From this hole, or door, a porch is built of pieces of hardened snow, sawn out with a saw in long square junks and set up on their ends each leaning against its opposite at the top: over all this they throw loose snow, and then water which in a minute or two cements it as firm as a rock. This porch is man hight in the middle and about 12 or 14 feet long; at the top of the inw'd end is the door of the house, into which you ascend by two or three steps which it leans over in such a manner that you need not stoop, but walk upright into the house. Right over the door is the window 2 feet long & 3 broad made of a piece of transparent ice cut thin for the purpose, and cemented in with snow and water. There is not much occasion for this window, the top of the house being so thin that of itself would admit a considerable quantity of light; but this window fronts the north and admits of great quantity of agreeable light; so that perhaps there never was a palace so well supply'd with that article. When they shut the door (as we say) they lay a piece of ice upon it, which is kept inside for that purpose. The warmth of these houses is surprising for a person soon after entering will be obliged to throw of some of his winter cloaths that he may not be too much incommoded by the heat; tho' they never have a spark of fire in them except 2 lamps which I believe without any good reason burn both day and night; except indeed it be to give the inside a lustre; this they effectually do and make every little particle of ice appear

like a diamond – Convenient to the porch is ye cook house; this is in form exactly like a quart bottle, the neck serving for a chimney: the door is just wide enough for a person to squeeze in on hands and knees: they never use a spark more fire than is barely necessary to dress their meat (Richardson 1935: 58).

## Discussion

When Richardson's description is considered alongside Cartwright's journal entry and letter to Eyre, it is clear that there are many similarities. All three sources refer to the same elements, including overall shape of the snow house, the door, the inner floor, the porch, the window, the cooking area, the quality of the light, and the inner warmth. Richardson, moreover, does not diverge from Cartwright's descriptive framework, but neither does he cover the range of details given by Cartwright, especially in the latter's journal entry. Phrasing repeats in both accounts, such as the opening reference to the uniqueness of the structure ("very strange indeed" and "curious habitation") and the simile of ice crystals shining like diamonds. Richardson details other elements much like Cartwright, including door size, the door's outward inclination, length of the entrance tunnel, window measurements, and reference to an adze, among others. It is true that each author's measurements differ for the window and the tunnel length—for unknown reasons—and Richardson mentions that the window faced north and that the cooking area was shaped like a "quart bottle," which is more specific than Cartwright's "glass house." Cartwright's journal record, however, is the most detailed of the three and contains extra information such as the snow house's location, a description of the stone lamps and how they functioned, reference to Inuit cooking methods, and overall building dimensions.

Cartwright's letter to Eyre contains less detail than the journal entry. Its point of interest is why it was found among the Cartwright family papers in the first place. Cartwright may have asked for it during the preparation of his journal for publication; this explanation would imply that he entered these details in the journal in June 1771, and not in February (but still before Richardson); or else Eyre may have passed it to the Cartwright family in order to keep them informed of Labrador events.

Given what we know of the chronology of these records, with Cartwright's journal entry and letter being the earliest and made after visiting Attuiock's snow house, it is certain that his is the primary record. Indeed, two principles of source criticism analysis maintain that a primary source is more reliable than a secondary source, and that the closer a source is to an event the more likely it is to be an accurate description. Source criticism further holds that independent sources containing the same message increase the credibility of the message.<sup>1</sup> Cartwright's and Richardson's snow house descriptions, however, illustrate the complexity of the process of identifying the primary source and differentiating verified information from speculation. On the face of it, each of these principles is upheld because Richardson's text originates close to the source, both in

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<sup>1</sup> The core principles of source criticism mentioned here are based on a translated summary from Olden-Jørgensen (1998) and Thurén (1997) (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Source\\_criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Source_criticism)).

time and place, because it can be corroborated by another text, and because it is woven into an account of a trip to Labrador on the *Grenville* and meetings with Inuit, both of which can be documented in other sources. Closer study, however, and the fortunate circumstance of having both Cartwright's journal and his letter to Eyre, prove that Richardson's account, albeit correct in fact and credible in its context, is an example of a third principle of source criticism, namely that a given source may be forged or corrupted and that strong indications of the originality of a source are needed to increase its reliability. Other elements of Richardson's account may thus be secondary (Richardson's description of walking a trapline and shooting a caribou are very reminiscent of entries found in Cartwright's journal). All of this emphasises the breadth of data and comparative research required to assess a document's historiographical reliability.

## Conclusion

Cartwright's description of a Labrador Inuit snow house is valued for its level of detail. While it is not the first time one learns of Inuit winter structures in early writings, it is the first elaborate description of this structure's interior arrangements, general ambience, and dimensions. Richardson's text mimics much of Cartwright's, and this level of detail contrasts with the rest of Richardson's account. The circumstances that led to the resemblance between the Richardson and Cartwright texts are unknown: Cartwright may have allowed Richardson to make notes from his journal during the latter's visit to Ranger Lodge or given him an oral description of the structure that closely followed what he had written down. Despite Richardson's credibility as a source on Labrador—he voyaged there on British naval vessels each year between 1765 and 1771 and produced written and pictorial records of his experiences—his snow house description is not what we have assumed it to be, namely a first-hand account. It illustrates the difficulty of distinguishing primary from secondary material, especially in a context where all else appears authentic. It is not, however, a parallel piece of historical ethnography but has Cartwright as its source, and it is Cartwright's description that must be considered the primary document.

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