Document généré le 12 oct. 2024 00:51

Newfoundland Studies

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Volume 1, numéro 2, fall 1985

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds1_2art03

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)
1715-1430 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Higgins, G. E. & Kirwin, W. J. (1985). Commander William Chimmo's Labrador Drawings of 1867. *Newfoundland Studies*, *1*(2), 163–174.

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Commander William Chimmo's Labrador Drawings of 1867

GILBERT E. HIGGINS AND WILLIAM J. KIRWIN

"THE CHAMBER of Commerce of Newfoundland having urged the Governor to represent to the Secretary of State for Colonies the benefit that would arise from a survey being made of North-East Labrador, and the advantage it would be to the community in the prosecution of the fisheries . . . [it was] decided that the *Gannet* should proceed on this service" ("A Visit to the North-East Coast" 258). So Commander William Chimmo explains his orders to carry out, in the summer of 1867, a hydrographic survey from Indian Harbour to Hopedale. Leaving on July 31st, he sailed from Halifax to Sydney, through the Strait of Belle Isle, and along the coast of Labrador. His observations were published in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society,* from which the above quotation is drawn, and *The Nautical Magazine* (1869), and these in turn were based on the "Journal" that the Commander kept on his surveying mission, describing his experiences in the communities the ship visited and recording the social and economic information he picked up on the way. He writes in his own person in a clear, measured hand (unless this version is a copy by a professional clerk), and illustrates his narrative at various points with black ink drawings, with occasional underlining and decorations drawn in red ink. As a professional surveyor he was responsible for the published charts and sailing directions for Webeck Harbour, Hopedale Harbour and Aillik Bay (Dawson Pt. 2, 164). The 1867 map reproduced in Fig. 1 shows the place-names he noted on the more frequently visited southern Labrador coast and the sketchy coastline north of Hamilton Inlet.

Little is so far known about William Chimmo except for his career in the surveying service compiled by L. A. Dawson, who lists four of his papers communicated to the Royal Geographical Society and three published charts from his surveys, in addition to those of Labrador. (See References

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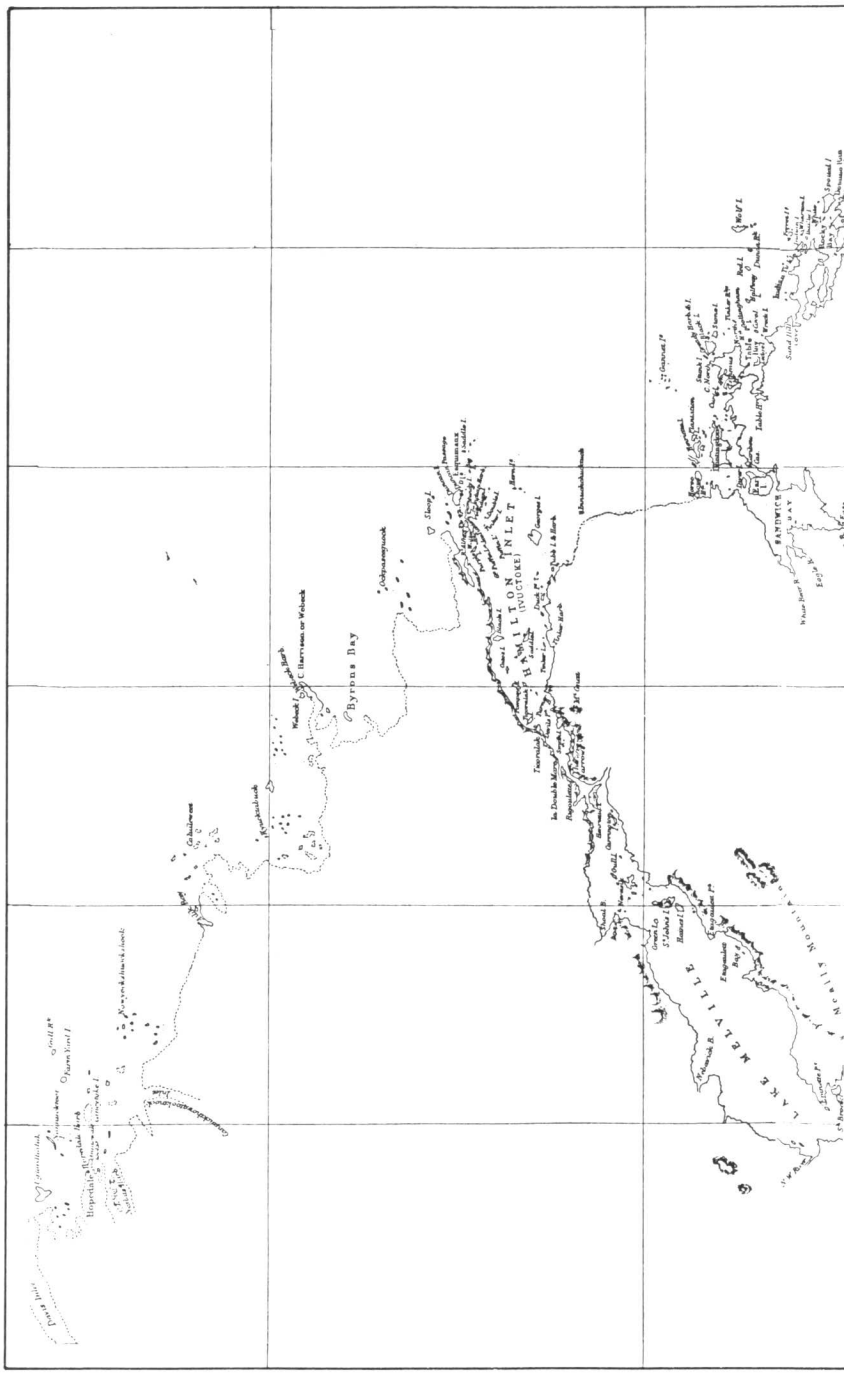

Byrons Bay
HAMILTON INLET
(IVUCTOKE)
LAKE MELVILLE
SANDWICH BAY

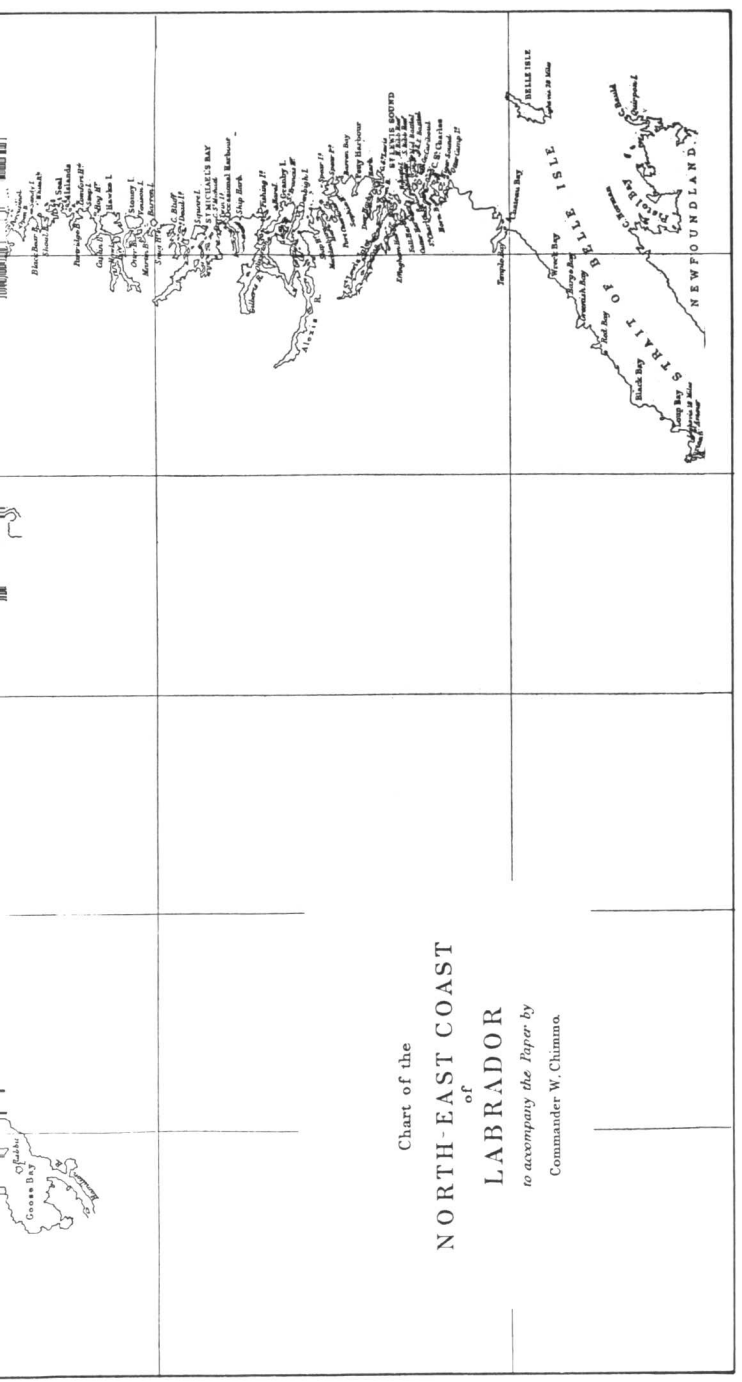


Fig. 1: (Original size: 32 x 37.5 cm.)

for his two brief scientific books listed in the British Museum *General Catalogue of Printed Books.*) As the title page of the "Journal" identifies him further as F.R.A.S., F.R.G.S. and F.M.S., additional information may be found in the records of these astronomical, geographical and medical societies. The name *Chimmo* cannot be located in the *Dictionary of National Biography* or any of the reference works treating English surnames. It was given to a Labrador topographical feature, Chimmo Rock, in the approach to Hamilton Inlet, sometime before 1974 (*Sailing Directions Labrador and Hudson Bay* 150).

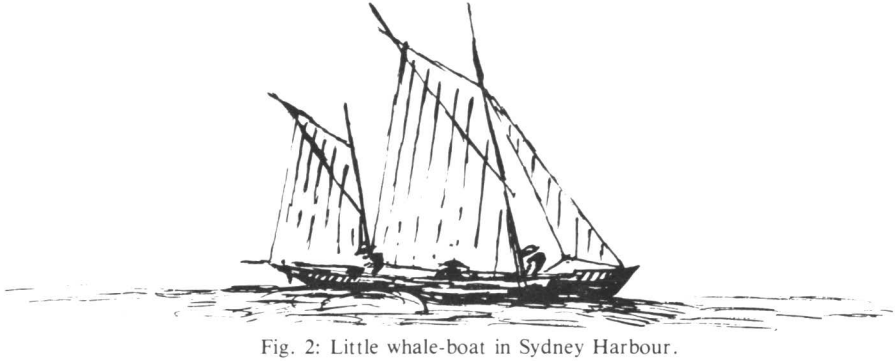


Fig. 2: Little whale-boat in Sydney Harbour.

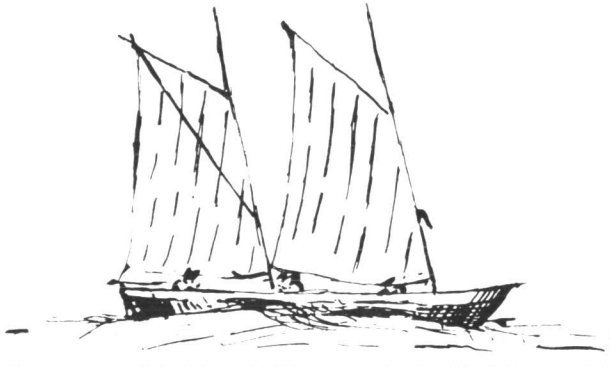


Fig. 3: "Forteau Bay was crowded with small fishing vessels, also Black Bay and Ains a Loup."

Fig. 4: "Off Wreck Bay the Icebergs commenced, in all fantastic forms and shapes. The first seen was 80 feet high, perfectly white with streaks of ultramarine here and there, aground; around it were whales [,] ducks, Arctic puffin, divers and tern, of nearly every description."

Twelve accompanying figures, taken from Chimmo's manuscript journal,[1] illustrate the account of his voyage from Sydney (Fig. 2) northward to his final surveying location at Hopedale.

In the Strait of Belle Isle the *Gannet* came upon the first of many fishing boats to be met with in the Labrador fishery of the period (Fig. 3). Proceeding northeast, Chimmo and his crew encountered grander icebergs than he had seen during six years' service in Behring's Strait ("A Visit" 261). The first (Fig. 4) was in Wreck Bay. In Peter's Bay (now St. Peter Bay) a mighty berg came in sight, and his drawing shows beside it the diminutive man-of-war steamer (Fig. 5). Another sketch made in the Strait shows a berg broken apart as it drifts southward (Fig. 6).

Fig. 5: "A berg off this bay [Peter's Island] was perhaps the most attractive we have seen, the temp'. of the water on passing it was 35°—13° less than we had a few minutes before at half a mile distant. It was 180 feet high and at its base were two remarkable small bergs like hay stacks."

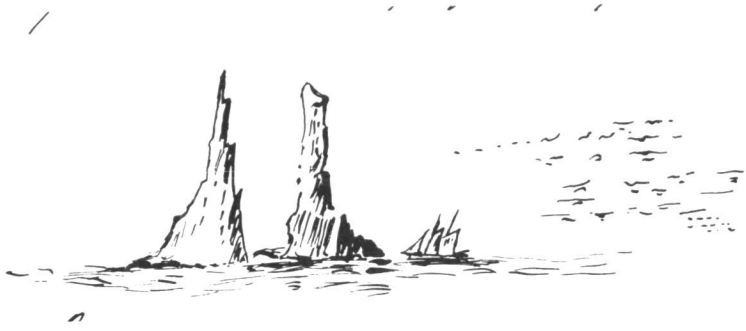


Fig. 6: "One berg we passed which had recently split in two, and now formed two [wedge] like pieces, very striking, about 80 or 90 feet high. It was at once evident what a dangerous place for navigation the Straits of Belle Isle must be in darkness or in fog with these numerous dangers, some fixed, some drifting; to strike against one, would be more fatal than running against an island; there you might get a landing; on an ice berg never!"

Numerous writers describing the Labrador coast remark on their experiences with mirages, and Commander Chimmo is no exception. The Entrance Island off Occasional Harbour shifted before his eyes (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: "The mirage distorted the land into the most inconceivable shapes. I took a sketch of the entrance to Occasional Harbour, but in a minute or two I did not know it; the following is a small specimen of a sketch altered in an instant."

Despite the stormy weather amidst the fine days, and the icebergs, Chimmo encountered many fishermen catching, curing and loading fish in the bays and harbours. Among the economic data collected along the coast and found in his *Nautical Magazine* account, he gives the following round figures: ". . . at the present the number [of summer fishermen] on the N. E. coast is not more than 20,000. There are about 2,000 families consisting of five to seven each" (192). His drawings show one of the full schooners, usually with ten to twelve men, and a boat on the fishing grounds, with three men (Fig. 8).

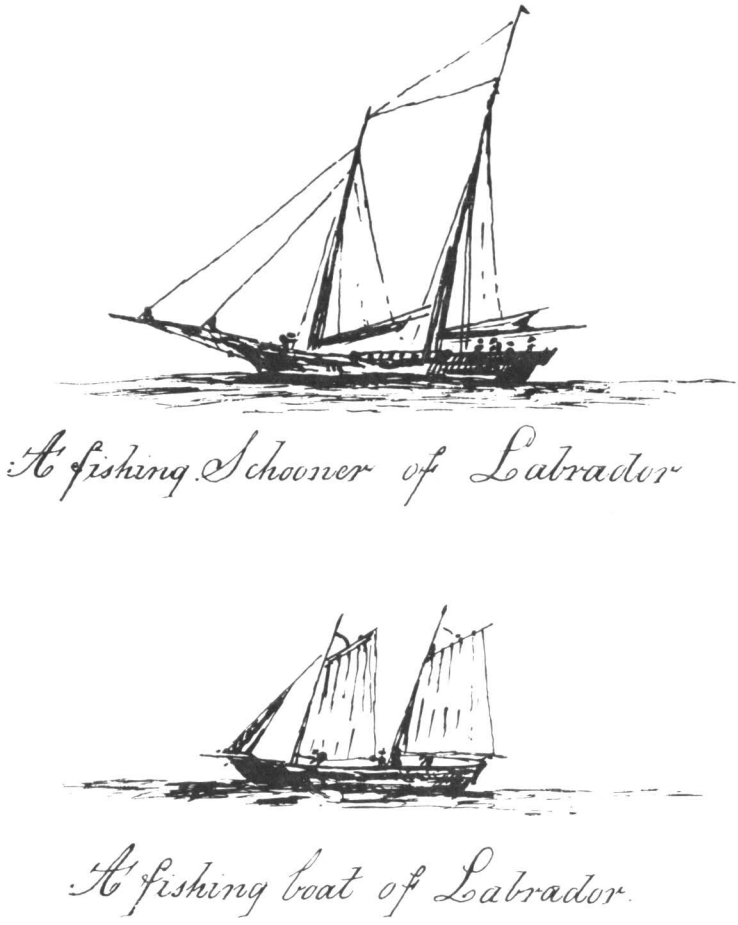


Fig. 8: "Several vessels sailed today [10 August] with fish, for the South."

After a concentrated survey had been made of Webeck Harbour, the *Gannet* returned south to Indian Harbour (Hamilton Inlet), the rendezvous where they were to load coal from the *Alma Jane*. Here Chimmo made the first of his more detailed drawings (Fig. 9):

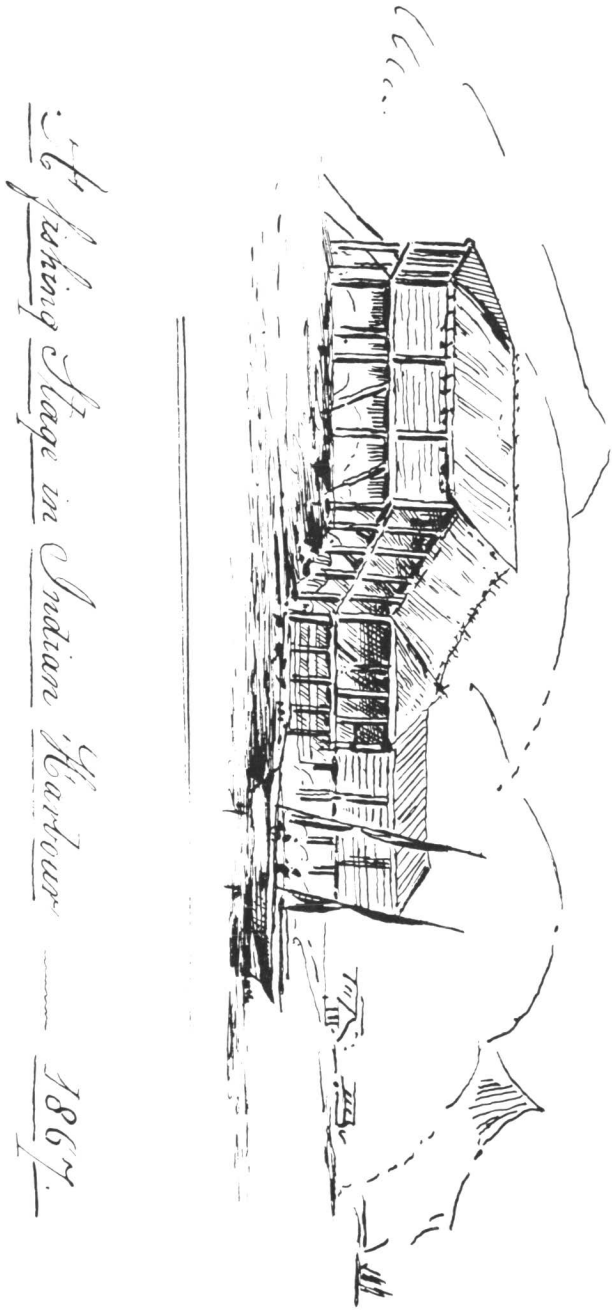


Fig. 9.

On 21 August, the *Gannet* arrived at Hopedale, where further careful surveying was carried out. Here Chimmo had leisure on stormy days to note down his observations on the Moravian missions, the Eskimos and their way of life, and the Indians. In one hut "good tempered women" crowded around him, and he recorded his impression (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10: "Their hair was done up exactly in the Chinese fashion, a perfect Chignon, which I have attempted to illustrate."

While wandering in the community, Chimmo copied inscriptions in the graveyard for his journal (not reproduced in his two articles) and sketched a grave with its stone on the surface of the ground (Fig. 11).[2]

Fig. 11: "The grave yard [at Hopedale] was very large for so small a place and was a sad illustration of the rigour of the climate. The graves were very neatly kept, painted white with a wooden border; the head-stone laid on the middle of the grave, and surrounded with forget-me-not and other wild flowers."

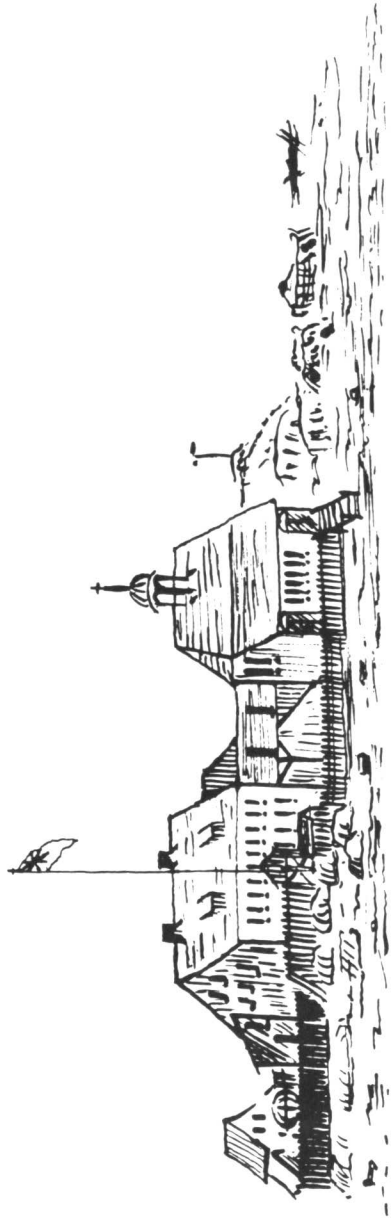
The officer made no drawings of the babies carried in the hoods of the jackets, but he noted the details of a mother's dress (Fig. 12).

This is Mrs Catherine Nicodemus

Fig. 12: "The hood over the head is worn thus and thrown back to receive the babe! The Jacket is neatly made of American linen with a hood, the edge of which is trimmed with Fur, and the centre with a band of embroidery, the Cuffs of the sleeves, and the tail (which is very peculiar) with embroidery also, the whole trimmed with (or edged with) red or blue braid."

The final drawing in the journal is Chimmo's view of the Moravian mission buildings seen from a distance (Fig. 13).

After pleasant social visits with the Moravian families and the completion of the Hopedale Harbour survey, the commander and crew left for the south on the twenty-sixth of August. The stopover at St. John's from the fourteenth to the nineteenth of September is described in some detail, and Chimmo's journal concludes with the entry for 22 September 1867 and the ship's arrival in Halifax.



The Mission and Church at Hyndale in 1867.

Fig. 13.

Notes

[1]The authors are grateful to Photographic Services, University Relations, for photographing the sketches. They are reproduced to scale, but some of the manuscript identifications have been reduced to fit the page. The quoted captions are taken from the journal rather than from the published accounts.

[2]The burial custom of the Moravians in the countries where they established missions was to set all the gravestones flat on the ground. (Personal com. from Hedwig Brückner.)

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