

VISITING ARTIST IN NORTHERN LABRADOR: A NEW VISION OF THE NAIN PLUTONIC SUITE

C.P. Koch¹ and D.T. James^{2,3}

²Regional Geology Section

ABSTRACT

Field geologists at the Geological Survey of Newfoundland and Labrador have the privilege of witnessing remote and beautiful areas of the Province that cannot easily be visited by the public. To record scenes of our increasingly disappearing wilderness, and to share a new vision of Geological Survey activities, a landscape artist was invited to join a field party during the 2004 field season. For three weeks in August 2004, the first author was posted to northern Labrador, in the field camp of the Nain Plutonic Suite bedrock-mapping team. For an artist whose primary subject is landscape, this presented a rare and wonderful opportunity for travel to, and work with/in, an otherwise remote environment. In a modest way, this opportunity revisits a Canadian tradition of having an artist illustrate and document northern expeditions. It also demonstrates the value of sharing logistical resources in remote areas.

GEOLOGY AND ART: A GEOLOGIST'S PERSPECTIVE (by D.T. James)

As a field geologist, I try to construct a model linking process, time and space (*see James et al.*, this volume). It is a model that attempts to explain the Earth I see and a former Earth I can only imagine. The model is built on a foundation of observations that vary from the scale of mineral grains to the broad expanse of the Labrador landscape. In everything I see in the field, at every scale, I am impressed by colour, shape, and texture. Although my goal is to make consistent and 'scientific' observations, I appreciate the influences of factors such as light, the angle of the sun, the wetness of a surface, and my imperfect memory on my impressions of colour, shape and texture.

A bedrock geological map is a portrait of the Earth; it is a factual representation of a collection of observations, and of sometimes equivocal interpretations. It is designed to be a scientific document. Nonetheless, it is a personal vision of the Earth. A landscape artist creates a portrait of the Earth inspired by colour, shape and texture - variations of the identical observations I use to create a geological map. Like a geological map, a painting contains a factual collection of observations, but also of artistic and poetic interpretations.

Where I attempt to produce a scientific portrait, a landscape artist presents a spiritual vision of the Earth

I hope that Christine's visit to Labrador has inspired her to produce works that will allow us to see a vision of the Nain Plutonic Suite that we have not previously appreciated.

ART AND GEOLOGY: AN ARTIST'S EXPERIENCE (by C.P. Koch)

It was a real learning experience (in many ways) for me to live in a geological field camp, and observe first-hand the work and daily life of the geologists in their element. This field area, underlain by the Nain Plutonic Suite, comprises very old rocks, and the complexity of its history, structure and potential for economic development is the reason for the Geological Survey's presence there. I defined my own job in the field: to try to become familiar with this very unfamiliar land, to try to read the landscape, as it were, and penetrate its inscrutability.

Every morning I would be dropped off by helicopter at some remote spectacular area - mountain top, river valley, or plateau - and I would usually remain there for the entire day, to explore and draw. Drawing has always been my primary

¹ Christine Koch Studio, Water Street, St. John's, Newfoundland

³ Present address: Canada-Nunavut Geoscience Office, P.O. Box 2319, Iqaluit, Nunavut X0A 0H0

way of learning about something, and so it seemed natural to approach an understanding of this landscape through drawing it.

Initially, I felt overwhelmed by the landscape. Labrador is called “The Big Land” for good reason. The scale is almost unbelievably huge. The rocks are barren and raw, like the bones of the Earth. Plutonic intrusions, voices of fire, cut through metamorphic and metasedimentary rocks. The land is exposed, inhospitable. It is an environment that has been stressed, subjected to extremes, from inside and out. The rocks have been transformed by heat and tectonic action; violated, ravaged, and gouged by glaciers. Plateaux are strewn with glacial erratics. Boulders perch.

Daily, I found myself sitting and observing and drawing this landscape for hours at a time, sometimes the entire day, until the helicopter came to pick me up in the evening; looking closely at the shapes of the land, trying to imagine the rock types and processes that would produce this geomorphology, and, in transcribing this landscape to paper, knowing that my field drawings captured only the present surface. I returned from this life-altering experience with a newfound passion for the North, two buckets of rock samples, sketchbooks filled with drawings and watercolours, thirty larger scale field drawings (33 cm by 50 cm), hundreds of photographs, and a couple of dozen of mixed-media drawings (see Plates 1 through 6). My ambition is to find an exhibition venue for some of the field-sketches, for the larger resulting series of finished paintings, and mixed media pieces, which will soon follow.

My intention is to mount a cross-disciplinary exhibition that incorporates not only my field drawings, as well as finished “studio” work, but also involves the geologists: I envisage using some of the field notes, as well as their more formal explorations. I would also like to be able to include actual geological samples from the sites I drew. All of this would help draw a broader, more complete picture of the geological landscape and its complexities, as well as some of the methods involved in reading the landscape, artistic and scientific. My goal in producing a body of work and mounting an exhibition is multi-fold:

1. to promote the activities of the Geological Survey of Newfoundland and Labrador;
2. to reaffirm the connections between art and the natural sciences, specifically geology, and to celebrate the long tradition of artists accompanying geologists and explorers into the field;

3. to offer a view into this remote, fairly inaccessible but breathtakingly beautiful landscape/environment;
4. to inspire/encourage other artists and natural scientists to partner/collaborate with each other, to demystify each other’s processes and activities for themselves and the public, and
5. to provide pleasure to the viewer; I hope to produce a body of work that not only documents and (hopefully) informs, but that is visually accessible, interesting, and enjoyable.

I am very excited with the opportunity that I had last summer, and I am eager to share it with the larger public community.

One of the challenges facing me now, as I work my studies up into larger finished paintings for exhibit, is to find the appropriate visual language with which to deal with this landscape. Much of my previous work is quite playful. But northern Labrador is not a playful, recreational landscape: it is savage and severe, indifferent to man’s presence and potentially threatening... and yet I did feel very comfortable alone in the wilderness, perhaps because of my palpable insignificance there. My understanding will grow as my paintings evolve.

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REFERENCE

- James, D.T., and Byrne, D.
This volume: Preliminary Report on the Geology of the Nain Plutonic Suite in the Kingurutik River area (NTS 14D/15). *In* Current Research, Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Natural Resources, Geological Survey, Report 2005-01.



Plate 1. *Above Tasialuk Lake, Labrador, 2004, 23' x 43', oil on prepared paper.*



Plate 2. *Untitled Labrador study, 2004, 11' x 44', oil on prepared paper.*



Plate 3. *Tasiataluk Lake (study)*, 2004 7' x 44', mixed media on prepared paper.

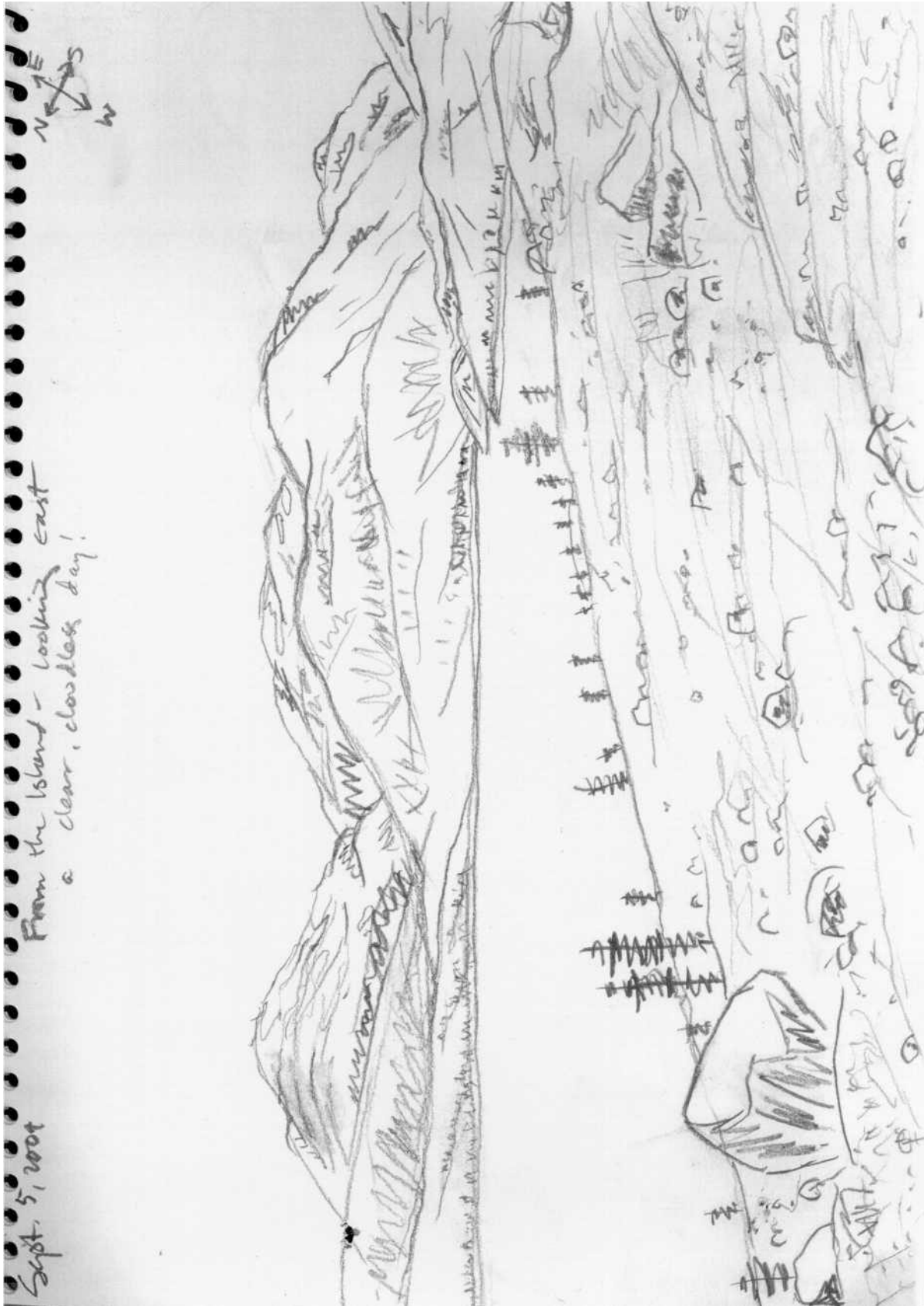


Plate 4. Field drawing. (sketchbook study), 7' x 10' pencil on paper.



Plate 5. Field drawing. (sketchbook study), 7' x 10' pencil on paper.



Sept. 5, 2004. On the island - looking N-E (uphill)
(boulder field)

Plate 6. Field drawing. (sketchbook study), 7' x 10' pencil on paper.