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6 “Now We Are Natives”: The Genocide of the Beothuk People and the Politics of “Extinction” in Newfoundland

The genocidal destruction of the Beothuk, a hunter-gatherer people who inhabited much of Newfoundland, mainly by British settlers, is of particular interest because they occupy a special status in Canadian national mythology. The Beothuk are the only Indigenous people acknowledged to have suffered “extinction”¹ as a result of the colonization of Canada. Canadians, who are generally proud of their reputation for upholding the values of liberal democracy, are usually prepared to admit to this blot on their historical record. In Newfoundland settler lore, the Beothuk hold a singularly prominent position. Here, their demise has evoked ongoing expressions of remorse with strong undercurrents of romanticization, evident in a wide range of cultural productions, including novels, poems, plays, musical tributes, paintings, sculptures, public memorials, and scholarly output. In 1977, Senator Frederick Rowe, a prominent Newfoundlander, described it as a “guilt complex of the first magnitude,” while Indigenous scholar Maura Hanrahan recently characterized the Beothuk as “objects of romantic racism.”²

Many Canadians and Newfoundlanders would, however, contest the idea that this “extinction” was the product of genocidal violence and attribute it instead to the inadvertent spread of contagious diseases coupled with often unforeseen consequences of economic competition. A belief often evident in settler explanations is that the “extinction” was partly due to the Beothuk being a vestige from a primordial era – a “doomed race” unable to adapt to modernity.³ Newfoundlanders have traditionally sought to displace much of the blame for the violence onto other parties, specifically Britain’s main imperial competitor in the region, the French, and the Beothuk’s main Indigenous rivals, their fellow Algonquian-speaking Mi’kmaq people, who inhabited the woodlands of the adjoining mainland to the south. Set-

1 I use quotation marks to indicate that this word is intensely controversial when applied to the Beothuk and that I do not subscribe to the “extinction” thesis.

2 Frederick Rowe, *Extinction: The Beothuks of Newfoundland* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1977), 7 and 99; Maura Hanrahan, “Good and Bad Indians: Romanticizing the Beothuk and Denigrating the Mi’kmaq,” in *Tracing Ochre: Changing Perspectives on the Beothuk*, ed. Fiona Polack (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 33.

3 See in particular Donald Holly, “A Historiography of an Ahistory: On the Beothuk Indians,” *History and Anthropology* 14, no. 2 (2003): 127–140.

tlar folklore has blamed the destruction of Beothuk society on the baseless allegation that the French armed and paid Mi'kmaq to kill Beothuk, an account now known as the Mi'kmaq mercenary myth.⁴ Conventional settler mythology also holds that the Beothuk became “extinct” with the death in 1829 of Shanawdithit, a young female captive, supposedly the last Beothuk person alive. This is vehemently challenged, especially by people who today assert Beothuk identity or ancestry and other Aboriginal groups who claim Indigenous status in Newfoundland. They insist on the survival of Beothuk individuals after their societies had been destroyed. The politics of “extinction” is thus at the core of contemporary contestations around identity and indigeneity in Newfoundland.⁵

The Beothuk

The Beothuk were the descendants of one of the later of several waves of migration from the mainland over 5,500 years. They were concentrated along the coast during summer, where a rich variety of marine resources were available, while the forested interior, which was rugged, colder, and scarcer in food, served as productive hunting grounds in winter. Abundant caribou herds were hunted during their fall migration from coastal grasslands to the woodland interior when they were vulnerable to being trapped in stockades of felled trees and funneled through ambush points. Salmon, seal, and caribou meat and fat, as well as a wide range of other fish species and shellfish, formed the mainstay of their diet. Birds, eggs, other marine mammals, and fur-bearing species – including beaver, otter, marten, bear, and fox – were among their staples. Plant foods such as berries and tubers were foraged seasonally.⁶

4 Leslie Upton, “The Extermination of the Beothuks of Newfoundland,” in *Sweet Promises: A Reader on Indian-White Relations in Canada*, ed. James Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 81–83; Jocelyn Thorpe, “Routes of Colonial Racism: Travelling Narratives of European Progress and Indigenous Extinction in Pre-confederation Newfoundland,” in Polack, *Tracing Ochre*, 277–278.

5 Suzanne Owen, “Unsettled Natives in the Newfoundland Imaginary,” in *Handbook of Indigenous Religion(s)*, eds. Greg Johnson and Siv Craft (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 221–233; Cynthia Sugars, “When the Beothuk Won’t Speak: Michael Crummey’s *River Thieves* and Bernice Morgan’s *Cloud of Bone*,” in Polack, *Tracing Ochre*; 54–74; Bonita Lawrence, “Unrecognized Peoples and Concepts of Extinction,” in Polack, *Tracing Ochre*, 297–320.

6 Sean Cadigan, *Newfoundland and Labrador: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), ch. 1; Ingeborg Marshall, *A History and Ethnography of the Beothuk* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1996), ch. 16; James Tuck, *Newfoundland and Labrador Prehistory* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Man, 1976).

The size of the Beothuk population at the start of colonization was likely to have been between 1,000 and 1,500, given the carrying capacity of the region's sub-arctic boreal ecosystem. The Beothuk lived in economically independent bands of between 30 and 50 people, usually led by an older, respected male. A defining cultural ritual was the application of ochre to the face and body to affirm members' identity as Beothuk. It was also applied to valued possessions, grave goods, and the deceased, signifying the deep spiritual and mythological significance with which the substance was imbued. The term “Red Indian” was thus often used to distinguish Beothuk from other Indigenous peoples on the island. They lived in conical structures of up to seven meters in diameter called *mamateeks*, constructed of wooden poles covered with layers of hide and bark. Beothuk built storehouses to stockpile caribou meat, blubber, eggs, and dried salmon, among other foodstuffs, as well as hides and furs.⁷

Contact during the 16th and 17th Centuries

While small numbers of Norse colonists briefly settled along the Newfoundland coast in the 11th century CE, Giovanni Cabot was the first navigator of the modern era to make landfall there in 1497. He found evidence of human habitation but saw no *Indigenes*. Within a few years, other European explorers started visiting the area, and fishing vessels frequented the Newfoundland coast between May and October in growing numbers primarily to exploit its exceptionally rich cod fishing grounds. There were regular sightings of, and brief contact with, Beothuk by subsequent expeditions, and fishing vessels came more regularly to the island from the mid-16th century onward. Exchanges during this period were limited to the coast and included small-scale, sporadic trade in furs as well as a good deal of misunderstanding that progressively destroyed mutual tolerance and easily escalated into aggressive behavior, especially on the part of Europeans.⁸

Early British interest in Newfoundland focussed on securing its valuable fishing resources, especially to the detriment of the French, who were dominant in the region prior to the 18th century. The navigator Sir Humphrey Gilbert first declared English sovereignty over Newfoundland in 1583, but it was not until 1713,

7 Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, chs. 18–21; Ingeborg Marshall, “Disease as a Factor in the Demise of the Beothuk Indians,” in *Change and Continuity: A Reader on Pre-Confederation Canada*, ed. Carol Wilton (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992), 138.

8 Upton, “Extermination of the Beothuks”, 68–69; Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 13–16.

with the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht at the conclusion of the War of the Spanish Succession, that France recognized this claim.

Encounters during the 16th and 17th centuries were marked by a growing reluctance on the part of the Beothuk to engage with Europeans, and after a few violent exchanges early on, most fled at the sight of these intruders. There was good reason for Beothuk to fear Europeans, whose behavior was unpredictable, and interactions with them were thus highly stressful. Some Beothuk were likely kidnapped, most probably to be displayed as curiosities in Europe, a common practice among mariners of the time. Others were robbed of furs and hides by gun-toting interlopers. By the early 17th century, as many as 200 British fishing vessels, and probably as many also from other European states, visited Newfoundland waters annually, creating ample opportunity for animosity. Besides a predisposition for violence – sometimes even shooting at Beothuk on sight – it would not be far-fetched to suggest that Beothuk soon realized the danger of contracting infectious diseases from these visitors. Their primary response to the European presence was thus to withdraw from contact.⁹

For much of this period, Beothuk and Europeans – the latter consisting overwhelmingly of transients and a tiny number of settlers – co-existed without much contact or conflict, except for tensions derived from the need for fishermen to dry and cure their catch. Because they spent several weeks ashore, fishermen found it convenient to erect landing stages, cabins, and drying racks and to leave equipment and stores behind for future use. These structures attracted Beothuk interest since they could salvage useful metallic implements. The Beothuk were especially keen to obtain nails for harpoons, spearheads, pots, knives, hatchets, needles, and scissors, but also materials such as rope, nets, and canvas. European fishermen were infuriated by what they saw as theft, while the Beothuk probably regarded themselves as having a right to salvage objects abandoned on parts of their territory that had been occupied without their permission. Nonetheless, there were a few friendly encounters, mostly the bartering of European metal goods for furs.¹⁰

⁹ Donald Holley Jr., “The Beothuks on the Eve of their Extinction,” *Arctic Anthropology* 37, no. 1 (2000): 80; Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 37–39, 58 and 474; Ralph Pastore, “The Collapse of the Beothuk World,” *Acadiensis* 19, no. 1 (1989): 56–57.

¹⁰ James Howley, *The Beothuks or Red Indians: The Aboriginal Inhabitants of Newfoundland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 15–18; Upton, “Extirmination of the Beothuks,” 71.

Intensifying Conflict through the First Half of the 18th Century

From the early 18th century, the contours of conflict across the island changed, forcing the Beothuk into retreat. They started suffering a marked decline as they found themselves pressured on several fronts, and their ability to subsist was increasingly compromised.

Firstly, groups of Mi'kmaq had been coming on transient stays to Newfoundland's southern coast to hunt and fish for some time. Some started settling along its southern and western coastlines after being dislodged from their homeland by European settlers from the early 1700s onward. Whereas relations with the Mi'kmaq were reputedly amicable at first, they soon deteriorated into hostility over competition for resources. The Mi'kmaq got the better of the Beothuk in confrontations because they obtained firearms from French allies in Labrador. Thus, during the first half of the 18th century, Mi'kmaq settlements deprived the Beothuk of territory along Newfoundland's southern and western coastlines.¹¹

Secondly, sporadic conflict erupted with Labrador Inuit, who came to the Northern Peninsula in growing numbers through the 18th century to hunt fur-bearing species. In addition, Labrador Innu, who were culturally closely related to the Beothuk and were also known as Montagnais, started trapping in Newfoundland with the encouragement of French fur traders as adjoining mainland stocks of these creatures dwindled. Rivalry for access to fur animals on the island intensified through the century. Inuit and Innu alliances with the Mi'kmaq and the French escalated tensions with the Beothuk. As rivalry for resources on the Northern Peninsula sharpened, Beothuk habitation there was restricted and eventually eliminated.¹²

It needs to be noted, however, that all of the Indigenous peoples around the Gulf of St. Lawrence and along the Labrador littoral were ancestrally and culturally related, and despite sporadic conflict exacerbated by colonial intrusion, they engaged in a wide spectrum of social interactions. Mi'kmaq and Innu oral traditions place far greater emphasis on amicable relations between these Indigenous peoples, which included migration across the region, trading, cultural borrowing, intermarriage, and cross-cutting bonds of kinship, than colonial sources, which tend to segregate these groups with contrived spatial and cultural boundaries

11 Frank Speck, *Beothuk and Micmac* (New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1922), 25–30, 43–46; Christopher Aylward, "The Beothuk Story: European and First Nations Narratives of the Beothuk People of Newfoundland" (PhD Thesis, Memorial University, 2014), 155.

12 Howley, *The Beothuks*, 25 and 48; Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 54–59.

and present them as being in continual conflict. The settler colonial archive thus underplays both Indigenous agency as well as the permeability of group boundaries. The Beothuk were part of a complex and layered set of regional relationships that included both conflict and reciprocity and which transcended the island.¹³

Thirdly, increasing numbers of European vessels visited the fishing banks off Newfoundland through the 18th century, swelling the presence of seamen who camped along the coast. By the mid-18th century, up to 12,000 seafarers, mostly British, came to the island yearly. The resident population remained small at first because economic prospects were limited, and the British government preferred preserving Newfoundland as a lucrative fishing ground without the expense of maintaining a civil administration. It thus discouraged settlement beyond the few outposts it needed to secure its claim to key fishing privileges. The settler population, however, grew steadily from little more than 500 in 1700 to about 10,000 by 1750 and around 25,000 by 1805, after which it advanced rapidly to approximately 60,000 by 1828 as possibilities for exploiting terrestrial resources opened up.¹⁴

There was a growing tendency, notable from about the 1720s onward, for fishermen to settle on the island. They fished for salmon in summer and trapped fur animals in the interior during winter. This put them in direct competition with the Beothuk for basic constituents of the latter's diet. As more immigrants settled on the island, fisheries started fanning out from the southeast, the main area of British settlement, along the northeastern shoreline. They spread westward into the Trinity and Bonavista Bay areas, further curtailing the foraging grounds of Beothuk. Whereas nearly all fishing had previously occurred offshore, commercial fisheries were now being established along rivers to exploit salmon on an ever-growing scale. Driven out of most of their traditional areas of habitation, the Beothuk progressively sequestered themselves in Notre Dame Bay and the Exploits River Valley area of northern Newfoundland.¹⁵

The Beothuk were much less prepared to interact or trade with colonists compared to other Indigenous groups, presumably because they perceived there to be little benefit to be had from it. The goods they most desired from Europeans could far more easily be obtained from abandoned fishery huts and through

13 Aylward, "Beothuk Story," 154–56, 179–80, 198–203, 247–256, 276–282 and 307; Patrick Brantlinger, "The Beothuk and the Myth of Prior Invasions," in Polack, *Tracing Ochre*, 133–34 and 138; Speck, *Beothuk and Micmac*, 18–29.

14 See the Statistics Canada website: https://www65.statcan.gc.ca/acyb02/1867/acyb02_1867001803-eng.htm and <https://tinyurl.com/3vxbr3mm>. See also Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 22, 38 and 461 n. 50; Upton, "Extinction of the Beothuks," 73.

15 Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 63.

stealth raids than modifying their economy and social organization to produce pelts. The Beothuk tended to become ever more insular and resorted to guerrilla attacks to damage and steal settler equipment as pressure on them mounted. Often, acts of sabotage and pilfering were the only indicators of a Beothuk presence to colonists.¹⁶

The 1720s witnessed a pronounced shift in Beothuk responses to growing European incursions as they started resorting to violent resistance. Increasingly hemmed into a restricted area, they were sufficiently stressed by the impacts of colonial penetration to move beyond simply trying to avoid these interlopers. Beothuk could no longer ignore colonists who muscled in on their salmon fishing grounds, killed off an alarming number of sea birds, and trespassed into their one remaining refuge to trap for fur. Nor could they passively accept the loss of resources that put their survival at serious risk. Beothuk now started resorting much more frequently to acts of reprisal against colonists and to taking revenge for acts of violence – sometimes years after the offense. Along the coast, resistance by Beothuk consisted mainly of taking or sabotaging fishing equipment and facilities, and in the interior, of targeting the traps and shelters of furriers. They periodically killed colonists, usually in revenge for violations they suffered. That such retribution was not always aimed at perpetrators but sometimes targeted colonists generally, and when the opportunity presented itself, inflamed settler fear, anger, and loathing toward the Beothuk.¹⁷

A notable development in the early 1720s is that Beothuk destroyed the weirs and nets and killed several workers at salmon fisheries along the Bonavista Bay frontier. The weirs and nets had prevented salmon from swimming upstream, where Beothuk harvested them. These attacks did not deter the owners of the fisheries, who responded by protecting their enterprises with armed guards. Nor did further acts of sabotage daunt others from entering the industry. The number of salmon fisheries continued to proliferate throughout the century, progressively excluding the Beothuk from a primary staple. By the 1770s, the Beothuk were almost completely barred from salmon runs by well-armed colonial competitors.¹⁸ They were also reduced to intermittent and stealthy foraging along the Notre Dame Bay coast at considerable risk to their lives.

16 Ralph Pastore, "Archaeology, History, and the Beothuks," *Newfoundland Studies* 9, no. 2 (1993): 269; Laurelyn Whitt and Alan Clarke, *North American Genocides: Indigenous Nations, Settler Colonialism, and International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 44–46 and 100.

17 Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, chs. 4 and 5.

18 Holley, "Eve of Destruction," 82; Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 62–67.

A similar process of exclusion occurred with regard to seabirds, which colonists harvested mainly for their feathers. Because seabird breeding colonies were located mainly on uninhabited coastal isles, settlers found it relatively easy to scare off or kill Beothuk as they were vulnerable when crossing open water. Not only were they ready targets, but their canoes were also easily damaged by shot. The Beothuk were reduced to the perilous practice of trying to access seabird colonies during heavy mists. Colonists slaughtered birds at such a rapid rate that this resource was nearly depleted by the third quarter of the 18th century. While seals remained plentiful, Beothuk access to them was obstructed by the European presence.¹⁹

Fur trapping also caused a great deal of tension as the number of trappers increased through the century. The laying of traplines and the erection of winter shelters often entailed deep incursions into Beothuk territory. The Beothuk's refusal to trade in furs or to trap for Europeans only served to facilitate the colonial penetration of their shrinking domain. The impact of trapping was severely felt by the Beothuk as it diminished an important food source at the same time as they were being excluded from marine resources. The Beothuk response to the activities of fur trappers was mainly to destroy or appropriate the traps and to try and frighten them off. Furriers were extremely vulnerable as they tended to work alone and in extreme isolation during winter. Yet very few were attacked.²⁰

Economic competition between the two groups was in the nature of a zero-sum game, as gains for colonists almost invariably entailed losses of subsistence for the Beothuk. The drive for profit maximization by the former, who tapped into vast imperial commodity markets, encouraged the intensive exploitation of diminishing resources and thereby the progressive destruction of ecological niches on which the latter depended for survival. Their small numbers and modest weaponry meant that Beothuk were not able to mount effective resistance to settler encroachment, and their insurgency elicited potentially devastating fisher-furrier counter-attacks. That killings on both sides were often motivated by revenge for earlier acts of brutality helped escalate levels of violence. Beothuk attacks and sabotage enraged colonists as it made an already hard life under difficult conditions even more precarious for many. Settler violence was also driven by fear. Although the Beothuk were seldom encountered, their intermittent raids and killing of colonists ensured that Europeans generally felt vulnera-

¹⁹ Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 67–68.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 69–72, 76–77 and 80–83.

ble outside of settled areas. The Beothuk practice of severing the heads of those they killed as trophies further instilled deep disgust and hatred among colonists.²¹

Colonial authorities, both in Britain and locally, by and large ignored settler violence against the Beothuk. There was effectively no centralized authority on the island until 1729, when the officer in command of the Royal Navy's North Atlantic squadron was co-opted to act as governor. Few governors served for more than a year or two and spent but a few weeks during summer in port at St. John's, the main British settlement. There was thus little continuity of policy or oversight of activity on the frontier. This ad hoc arrangement made for growing lawlessness, especially toward the Beothuk, as the resident population grew. The further away colonists were from St. John's, the greater their freedom to act unilaterally against Beothuk. And in the Notre Dame Bay and Exploits River area, there was no colonial administrative presence.²²

Escalation to Exterminatory Levels of Violence

Unconstrained settler violence toward the Beothuk became much more evident in the latter half of the 18th century and intensified markedly to genocidal levels in its last quarter. This escalation coincided with permanent British settlement along the Notre Dame Bay coastline, forcing Beothuk foraging limits westward and inland. It is thus not surprising that there was an upsurge in sabotage and violent attacks by Beothuk from the 1760s onward as they sought to defend their last refuge on the island. This Beothuk resistance threatened newly established fishing and furring enterprises in the Notre Dame Bay area, resulting in a ferocious backlash by the colonists, which reached its peak in the 1780s and 1790s.

From the 1760s onward, hunters, fishermen, furriers, and bird cullers usually shot at or killed Beothuk, often even at women and children, whenever they crossed paths. Shooting at Beothuk in chance encounters was the principal pattern of settler violence. John Cartwright, who in 1768 led an abortive government-sponsored mission to make contact with the Beothuk, attested in his report to Governor Hugh Palliser that "Red Indians were ruthlessly massacred at every possible occasion by the barbarous furriers." Palliser's subsequent communique to his superiors in London reiterated that "killing prevails amongst our People to-

²¹ Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 61–83 and 95–112; Rowe, *Extinction*, 99–116.

²² Upton, "Extermination of the Beothuks," 73.

wards the Native Indians . . . whom our people always kill, when they can meet them."²³

A second type of retaliation by frontiersmen was the hot pursuit of raiders, pilferers, and saboteurs. These reprisals occurred infrequently as the Beothuk were extremely adept at guerrilla tactics, and colonists were not able to predict when or where they might strike, with raiders usually long gone before the damage was discovered. Thirdly, the Beothuk were spread too thinly over rugged terrain and were too sequestered to make mass killing a regular occurrence. There were, however, periodic raids by armed squads of vigilantes that resulted in massacres. These forays ordinarily took place after the Exploits River had frozen over to provide easier access to the Red Indian Lake area, where the Beothuk coalesced during winter. Most of these attacks were clandestinely organized and seldom reported, and their participants were normally reluctant to talk about them. By the latter part of the 18th century, such attacks on Beothuk bands were devastating to their chances of survival as their population had shrunk markedly, and bands were under immense pressure merely to find enough sustenance to survive.²⁴

Although some informants saw good reason to cover up their lawless behavior, others had no compunction about boasting of their misdeeds. There were times when settler hatred of Beothuk spilled over into an astonishing degree of open viciousness. Cartwright, for example, relates how a pregnant Beothuk woman who fell into the hands of a group of fishermen was disemboweled and tortured. Not only did the perpetrators later boast of their deed, they even displayed her severed hands as proof of their exploit. Circulating yarns of gory encounters with Beothuk became an integral part of Newfoundland frontier folklore. While these stories were usually embellished and sometimes exaggerated out of all proportion, their largely positive reception among colonists indicates a general lack of empathy toward the Beothuk and the degree to which they were dehumanized.²⁵

The Beothuk did not, however, routinely kill settlers when they had the opportunity. Their most favorable chance for doing so was to attack trappers out in the field, but they declined to do so. Although Beothuk sometimes took random revenge on colonists, they at other times distinguished between those who had wronged them and those who had not. James Howley reported the good example of Thomas Rowssell, notorious for killing Beothuk, who was slain and decapitated

23 Howley, *The Beothuks*, 45, 47 and 50. See also Upton, "Extermination of the Beothuks," 74.

24 Howley, *The Beothuks*, 28; Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 111 and 119.

25 Howley, *The Beothuks*, 34 and 265–288; Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 101–102.

in 1790, while his brother George, who tolerated the Beothuk presence and sometimes even allowed them to take from his fish, was left in peace.²⁶

In 1792, naval lieutenant George Pulling, with the approval of his superiors, took the initiative of investigating the nature of frontier relations in Newfoundland with a view to putting an end to hostilities and protecting the Beothuk. He produced a report corroborating widespread frontier violence against Beothuk based on both eyewitness and second-hand testimony. Pulling's account covers the period from 1779 to 1792 when the frontier conflict was at its most sustained and ruthless. The report confirms that the violence consisted mainly of the murder of individuals and small groups of Beothuk but also of intermittent massacres and that an exterminatory mindset had developed among many frontiersmen by this time. As the brothers William and Richard Richmond, members of a 1790 raiding party, explained to Pulling, they were "fully resolved to kill everyone we saw both Big & small," even though they self-servingly denied that anyone was killed when they attacked a band of about 30 Beothuk.²⁷

Pulling collected evidence from several informants on the most infamous of the mass atrocities against Beothuk, a slaughterous raid in the winter of 1781 referred to as the "glorious expedition" by its main perpetrator, John Peyton Sr. As the most prominent owner of salmon fisheries in Notre Dame Bay, Peyton suffered significant financial loss as a result of Beothuk raids. He was also notorious for inciting and committing violence against Beothuk. In the winter of 1781, Peyton, together with two associates, set out on a three-day trek up the Exploits River to take revenge against the Beothuk. When they came upon a cluster of mamateeks housing what probably constituted an entire band of over 50 members along the eastern shore of Red Indian Lake, the three heavily armed men advanced on the unsuspecting community, firing "long guns loaded with buckshot" as they drove forward.²⁸ Many victims were killed or wounded as they ran screaming from their dwellings for the cover of the woods. The band was destroyed as many of those who managed to escape were wounded and left stranded in the middle of winter without adequate food, shelter, or clothing as their stores were plundered, mamateeks burnt down, and equipment destroyed. Peyton's bloodlust was revealed when he encountered a Beothuk man who was so badly wounded that he was unable to stand,

26 Howley, *The Beothuks*, 267. For other examples see Aylward, "Beothuk Story," 267–274; Ingeborg Marshall, *Reports and Letters by George Christopher Pulling Relating to the Beothuk Indians of Newfoundland* (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1989), 123.

27 Marshall, *Reports and Letters*, 123 and 125, emphasis in the original.

28 Whitt and Clarke, *North American Genocides*, 108.

though he tried to fight back with a broken trap. Peyton reportedly “wrested the trap from him & beat his brains out with it.”²⁹

Attempts at Contact, Conciliation, and Protection

Alongside the powerful punitive and exterminatory drives that animated settler sentiment toward the Beothuk, there was also a countervailing, largely ineffective, compassionate impulse within Newfoundland’s elite strata. As the 18th century wore on, it became apparent to sympathetic observers, essentially a handful of British officials and immigrants with a humanitarian bent, that Beothuk society was under dire threat and that colonists were largely responsible for the conflict. This resulted in various attempts at initiating contact with Beothuk, conciliating them, and protecting them from further depredation. From the late 1760s, the governors of Newfoundland, starting with Hugh Palliser, periodically issued proclamations ordering residents to live in peace with Beothuk and threatening culprits with prosecution. These decrees were ignored and unenforceable, and no one was ever convicted of killing or maltreating Beothuk.

The first significant attempt at peace-making was initiated in 1768 by Governor Palliser after unusually intense conflict over the preceding decade. Palliser sent a mission headed by Lieutenant John Cartwright to seek out groups of Beothuk. Cartwright was extremely sympathetic toward the Beothuk, regarding the “wantonness of cruelties” against them to have been “almost incredible” and Beothuk hostility to be founded on a “just” and “noble resentment of wrongs.” In his estimate, the English “fishers” displayed “inhumanity which sinks them far below the level of savages.”³⁰ Cartwright led a 14-man squad to explore Beothuk territory and reach out to them. They made a roundtrip of ten days up the Exploits River Valley but encountered no Beothuk – probably because most were living along the coast at that time of year.³¹

From the mid-1780s through to the turn of the 19th century, a number of humanitarians made representations to the British government for the protection of the dwindling Beothuk population against settler violence. Petitions were submitted to the Colonial Office in 1784 by George Cartwright, a Labrador fishing entrepreneur who 16 years earlier had joined the excursion up the Exploits River led by his brother John; in 1786 by George Pulling, who six years later was to produce

²⁹ Marshall, *Reports and Letters*, 104 and 137. Emphasis in original.

³⁰ Howley, *The Beothuks*, 34.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 29–45.

a second, much more comprehensive, submission; in 1792 by John Reeves, Chief Justice of Newfoundland; in 1797 by Governor William Waldergreave; and in 1799 by John Bland, Bonavista Bay magistrate. They all pointed to widespread frontier violence against Beothuk and the danger of their extinction. Their proposals included a combination of establishing a reserve for Beothuk in the Notre Dame Bay-Exploits River area, having navy patrols keep intruding colonists in check, sending peace missions into the interior, and appointing an official tasked with maintaining order. All of these suggestions were either ignored or rejected by the Colonial Office.³²

The last state-led peace initiative toward the Beothuk came in January 1811 when Lieutenant David Buchan, together with 24 crew members, were sent into the Newfoundland interior by Governor Sir Thomas Duckworth to make contact with the Beothuk. The party traveled up the Exploits River, where the advance guard of about a dozen members surprised a sleeping Beothuk camp of three *mamateeks* housing at least 40 inhabitants. According to Buchan, the shocked Beothuk managed to recover their composure and welcomed the intruders with food and seeming affability. After more than three hours of friendly interchange, Buchan decided to return to his camp to fetch presents, leaving two of his men with the Beothuk and taking four *Indigenes* with him as gestures of mutual goodwill. When he and his men returned the next day, the deserted camp was in disarray, and nearby, they found the headless bodies of the two crew members left behind. By this time, their four Beothuk companions had absconded. Seventeen years later, the captive *Shanawdithit*, who was one of the children in the camp at the time, reported that they were temporarily taken captive by Buchan and that they feared he would return with a large force to capture or kill them. After an intense debate over how to react, they decided to kill the two men and hide in a remote, forested part of the interior.³³

Although there were no further government-sponsored efforts to make contact with the Beothuk, the desire to do so remained alive within Newfoundland's elite. No one was more committed to doing so than William Epps Cormack, an entrepreneur with an inclination toward scientific inquiry and philanthropy. In 1822 he set out with a *Mi'kmaq* guide, Sylvester Joe, across Newfoundland to look for Beothuk and gather information about the island's natural resources. However, he came across no Beothuk on this grueling two-month-long trip as he traveled too far south. In October 1827, Cormack organized a second foray with three

32 Howley, *The Beothuks*, 48 and 58; Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 113–121; Marshall, *Reports and Letters*, 17–19 and 45–50.

33 Howley, *The Beothuks*, 77–80 and 226–227; Speck, *Beothuk and Micmac*, 49–50.

Indigenous guides shortly after founding the Boeothick Institution [sic] to raise funds and muster public support for its aims of establishing friendly communication with Beothuk. Although Cormack traveled over 300 kilometers through the heart of Beothuk territory and came across abundant vestiges of their habitation, he again failed to find any Beothuk. Two searches over several months by three Indigenous scouts employed by the Boeothick Institution were launched in 1828, but these also proved fruitless. Cormack thus assumed that the Beothuk had died out – or were on the verge of doing so.³⁴

Attempts at contact and conciliation failed because of Beothuk antipathy toward engagement with the colonists and the ineptness of many of the latter's initiatives. The well-intentioned efforts of a few humanitarians were nowhere near enough to compensate for the frontier sentiment that, in the words of the Reverend Moses Harvey, regarded "red men as vermin to be hunted down and destroyed."³⁵ Importantly, philanthropists did not in the least consider abandoning the settler project but wanted it to be conducted in a more humane fashion.

Shanawdithit

Although frontiersmen habitually killed Beothuk they chanced upon by the mid-18th century, at least eight women and children were taken captive.³⁶ The last of these, Shanawdithit, who was taken captive in April 1823 when in her early 20s, is of particular significance as she provided much of the first-hand testimony we have about Beothuk culture. She looms large in accounts of the Beothuk because she was taken to be the last surviving Beothuk, and Cormack made a belated effort to extract ethnographic information from her. She today holds an iconic status within Newfoundland settler paradigms as the "last of her race."³⁷

Shanawdithit was seized when furriers chanced upon a small family group of emaciated Beothuk foraging along Notre Dame Bay. Her father drowned after falling through thin ice trying to escape across a river while she, her mother, and her sister were apprehended. Both her mother and sister, critically ill with tuberculosis, died soon thereafter. Shanawdithit, known to colonists as Nancy April –

³⁴ Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 181–200.

³⁵ Howley, *The Beothuks*, 62.

³⁶ Rowe, *Extinction*, 42; Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 122–136.

³⁷ Lianne Leddy, "Historical Sources and the Beothuk: Questioning Settler Interpretations," in Polack, *Tracing Ochre*, 199–208; Hanrahan, "Good and Bad Indians," 33–44; Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, ch. 14.

after the month in which she was captured – was sent to live with John Peyton Jr. on Exploits Island, where she worked as a domestic servant for five and a half years.

In September 1828, Shanawdithit was transferred to St. John's and placed under the care of the Beothuck Institution and Cormack so that she could improve her command of English and serve as a source of knowledge about her community. His searches for Beothuk having proved futile, Cormack assumed that Shanawdithit was the only authentic source of information about Beothuk lifeways left. In the four months before Cormack became bankrupt and left Newfoundland, she helped him compile a list of Beothuk words and provided information about her experiences and about Beothuk material, cultural, and spiritual practices. In declining health due to tuberculosis, she died on 6 June 1829.³⁸

Shanawdithit was clearly not the last living Beothuk. This assumption on the part of the settler establishment rested on the shaky basis that they had encountered no Beothuk during the searches organized by Cormack. Shanawdithit confirmed there to have been about a dozen members of her own band alive at the time of her capture, and there appears to have been the residue of another small band in the interior, as well as a few remnant groups living on other parts of the island and probably also on the mainland. It is very likely that these survivors joined Mi'kmaq, Innu, and Inuit communities. A few women were likely taken into settler households as servants or concubines. There were also several reports of sightings and encounters with Beothuk in subsequent years. There are many examples in the Mi'kmaq and Innu oral traditions of Beothuk being absorbed into their societies through intermarriage and kidnapping. What is clear, though, is that by the time of Shanawdithit's capture, Beothuk society had ceased to exist as a viable social entity and, soon thereafter, as a distinct cultural one. However, although their society was destroyed, Beothuk individuals certainly survived.³⁹

A Case of Genocide?

Although Beothuk society suffered from slow attrition rather than a spectacular collapse, its destruction was clearly genocide, for not only was Beothuk communal life entirely destroyed, but much of the harm inflicted on them by the settler

³⁸ Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 201–223.

³⁹ Beverley Diamond, "Santu Toney, a Transnational Beothuk Woman," in Polack, *Tracing Ochre*, 247–263; Mike Codato, "Hunger Pangs in a Cold Forest: A Reexamination of the Disappearance of the Beothuk," *Totem* 1, no. 1 (1994): 53–55; Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 224–226; Speck, *Beothuk and Micmac*, 55–69.

establishment was intentional. The destructive behavior of colonists, mediated through the peculiarly extractive nature of the Newfoundland economy – its culling of wild animals rather than working the land – progressively eroded Beothuk access to the necessities for life. At no point did settlers or the British government doubt their right to exploit the island's resources, nor did they consider the rights of Indigenous peoples in any meaningful way.

The turning point in the eradication of Beothuk society came in the middle decades of the 18th century when the colonial economy swung from being an enterprise mainly conducted by seasonal migrants to one dominated by residents. Importantly, this was when settlers started exploiting terrestrial and riverine resources – salmon, fur, and feathers – more intensively, depriving Beothuk of key sources of food. The likelihood of a genocidal outcome became increasingly evident to colonial observers through the latter half of the 18th century. In the 1770s, George Cartwright, for one, perceived the situation with crystal clarity:

I fear that the race will be totally extinct in a few years, for the fishing trade is continually increasing, almost every river and brook which receives salmon is already occupied by our people . . . the bird islands are continually robbed . . . our furriers are considerably increased in number . . . [and] the breed of beavers is greatly diminished.⁴⁰

From the mid-18th century, many fisher-furriers on the frontier took every opportunity to inflict violence on Beothuk they came across. They took the law into their own hands because they felt threatened by Beothuk, regarded this violence to be necessary, and believed that they were justified in their actions. A significant contributory factor to exterminatory violence against Beothuk was that settlers had little need for, or saw no prospect of, employing Beothuk labor. By the 18th century, colonists had also given up hope of establishing trading relations with Beothuk but were nonetheless exposed to the risk of sabotage, theft, and violence. Thus, in the words of Leslie Upton, for colonists involved in the extractive economy, "It made sound business sense to shoot [Beothuk]."⁴¹ While direct violence played a prominent role in the demise of the Beothuk, their displacement from the productive coastal areas to the colder, rugged, and relatively resource-poor interior severely damaged their social fabric.⁴²

⁴⁰ Marshall, *History and Ethnography*, 32–33.

⁴¹ Upton, "Extermination of the Beothuks," 74 and 84–85.

⁴² For a prosecutorial exploration of charges of genocide that could theoretically be built against John Peyton Sr. and the British government, see Whitt and Clarke, *North American Genocides*, 100–116.

There is no evidence of communicable diseases having been used as an intentional tool of destruction or of their impact on Beothuk society except in the final stages of its decline. The poor health of latter-day captives confirms the significant role of tuberculosis in the destruction of the Beothuk. Buchan's 1811 report remarked on the robust health of the Beothuk band he engaged. Yet Shanawdithit told Cormack that after their encounter with Buchan, 22 members of their band's complement of 72 had died within two years and that by 1819, the collective had dwindled to 31 as a result of "hardship and want." This suggests that Buchan's party introduced tuberculosis, which was widely prevalent within the immigrant community, into an otherwise healthy band and that this played a pivotal role in the closing stages of the group's destruction.⁴³

The British government was complicit in this genocide because it was informed of the violence on numerous occasions but chose not to intervene. For the most part, the local administration, in so far as it existed, also ignored these violations except for a few half-hearted and ham-handed attempts at effecting some kind of reconciliation. There was an almost total lack of oversight of settler criminality in their dealings with Beothuk, with no perpetrator convicted of such violence. The Parliamentary Select Committee Report on Aboriginal Tribes of 1837, commissioned by the British government to assess the condition of Aboriginal peoples across the empire, effectively concedes that the Beothuk had suffered genocide:

[In Newfoundland] it seems to have been for a length of time accounted a "meritorious act" to kill an Indian. On our first visit to that country the natives were seen in every part of the coast. We occupied the stations where they used to hunt and fish, thus reducing them to want . . . so that doubtless many of them perished by famine; we also treated them with hostility and cruelty, and "many were slain by our own people[.]" [. . .] Under our treatment they continued rapidly to diminish . . . In the colony of Newfoundland it may therefore be stated that we have exterminated the natives.⁴⁴

"Now We Are Natives": The Politics of "Extinction"

Extinction differs from genocide in that the former implies the death of each and every member of a group, whereas the latter refers to the destruction of a social group as a functional entity but not necessarily of every individual in the collec-

⁴³ Howley, *The Beothuks*, 77–78 and 226–228; Marshall, "Disease as a Factor," 138–149.

⁴⁴ British Parliamentary Papers no. 425, *Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes (British Settlements)*, 1837, 4–5.

tivity. To characterize the obliteration of Beothuk society as an “extinction” would be to misrepresent the outcome of this genocide, as there clearly were survivors, albeit a relatively small number. How the ultimate fate of the Beothuk is construed – whether as extinction, near extermination, or genocide, for example – has far-reaching implications for the contemporary politics of identity in Newfoundland as it informs settler and Indigenous self-perceptions in conflicting ways and fundamentally influences the power dynamic between the two.

On the one hand, Newfoundland settler perspectives have tended to fixate on the symbolically powerful role of Shanawdithit as the last living Beothuk because this myth advances settler interests in a multitude of ways. The “extinction” thesis has served to justify settler occupation of the land, to support their aspirations of being recognized as its legitimate owners, and to invalidate existing First Nations’ assertions of indigeneity to the island. The basic argument rationalizing the occupation of the land is that with the “extinction” of the Beothuk, Newfoundland became *terra nullius*, and settlers could rightfully appropriate the land and its resources – not that colonists desisted from doing so before the “extinction.” Being able to date-stamp the death of the *last* Indigene definitively and being able to concretize it through the demise of a particular person appeals greatly to settler myth-making as it allows that event to be portrayed as a historical rupture that nullifies all Indigenous title to the land. It also follows that if all Indigenes are dead, there are also no present traumas, inequalities, or injustices to address in this regard. Further, any such demands that do arise can be dismissed as inauthentic or fraudulent. Recognizing the Beothuk, and only the Beothuk, as indigenous to Newfoundland thus has the very useful consequence of helping to delegitimize any other claims to indigeneity on the island. The romanticization of the Beothuk and denigration of existing Native peoples’ assertions of indigeneity suggests that the pervasive Euro-American tradition of regarding the only good Indians to be dead Indians still has resonance in modern Newfoundland.⁴⁵

Conclusion

There are other ways in which the “extinction” thesis promotes settler entitlement and undermines Indigenous interests. Firstly, the mercenary myth, which was included in Newfoundland’s school history curriculum as late as the 1970s, seeks to weaken Mi’kmaq demands by portraying them as non-Indigenous, relatively recent arrivals who were deeply complicit in the destruction of the Beothuk. Secondly, the

45 Hanrahan, “Good and Bad Indians,” 42–44.

romanticization of the Beothuk and accompanying expressions of guilt and sorrow go some way toward salving settler consciences and portraying contemporary Newfoundland society as enlightened, just, and compassionate – and, dare one say, therefore worthy inheritors of the land. Thirdly, a tendency to present the “extinction” as an episode from the distant past, and much of it the result of unintended consequences, helps to sanitize colonial violence and depict settler dominance as a normalized state of affairs. Fourthly, it engenders the tendency within settler discourse to depict the Beothuk as an archaic holdover from a primordial epoch, pre-ordained to die out in the face of the colonial encounter.⁴⁶

On the other hand, Mi'kmaq and Innu communities living in Newfoundland hold that they, like the Beothuk, are indigenous to the island. While Mi'kmaq contend that southern Newfoundland was part of their ancestral territory prior to colonization, Innu insist that the Beothuk were little more than co-ethnics who happened to be living on the island with whom they had had close social relations since time immemorial. These assertions are supported by the archaeological record, linguistic evidence, cultural affinities, and oral tradition. It is worth reiterating that both Innu and Mi'kmaq oral traditions maintain that the Beothuk were not completely exterminated but that some survivors were absorbed into their societies, that others dispersed outward onto the mainland as far as New England, and that a few were assimilated into settler society. Those who adapted by joining colonial society would very likely have striven to hide their Beothuk heritage out of self-interest.⁴⁷

There are a small number of people today who espouse Beothuk identity and seek to honor their heritage. DNA studies have confirmed the survival of Beothuk genes in the modern Newfoundland population. It is in particular a resurgence in the affirmation of Mi'kmaq identity and indigeneity to Newfoundland since the mid-1990s, despite various forms of repression by the dominant society, that has politicized questions around belonging, land claims, memorialization, the content of school history curricula, and other issues relevant to Aboriginal status.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Brantlinger, “Myth of Prior Invasions,” 133; Hanrahan, “Good and Bad Indians,” 44–45; Holly, “Historiography,” 127–136; Thorpe, “Routes to Colonial Racism,” 270 and 277.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Penashue and Elizabeth Yeoman, “‘The Ones that were Abused’: Thinking About the Beothuk Through Translation,” in Polack, *Tracing Ochre*, 83; Aylward, “Beothuk Story,” 183–185, 197–208, 247–56, 263–64, 282, 290 and 308; Jeff Webb, “A Few Fabulous Fragments: Historical Methods in James P. Howley,” *Social History* 50, no. 101 (2017): 91.

⁴⁸ Steven M. Carr, “Evidence for the Persistence of Ancient Beothuk and Maritime Archaic Mitochondrial DNA Genome Lineages Among Modern Native American Peoples,” *Genome* 63, no. 7 (2020): 349–355; Owen, “Unsettled Natives,” 229–230.

The all too ready assumption, if not insistence, on the part of the Newfoundland settler establishment that Shanawdithit's death marks the "extinction" of the Beothuk provides a good example of the deep-seated impetus within settler societies toward their indigenization – the assertion that they had been made or remade by the land in ways that gave them an intrinsic relationship with it. Writing at the end of the 1980s, the Canadian academic Terry Goldie drew attention to an undue concern, especially among those descended from earlier colonists, about the sort of lineage that qualifies residents as "native Newfoundlanders," a trait that betrays a desire to usurp the status of the Indigene. Goldie bluntly summarized the subtext of their discourse as "We had natives. We killed them off. Now we are natives."⁴⁹ The assertion of a separate Newfoundland identity among settlers and their resistance to being drawn into a non-descript Canadian nationality comes at the cost of the collective shame of having "killed off their natives."⁵⁰

Nearly two centuries after the erasure of their society, the Beothuk still have a powerful presence in the social, political, and emotional lives of Newfoundlanders – mediated through their absence. Their spectral existence continues to haunt contestations around notions of self, society, and indigeneity on the island.⁵¹

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⁴⁹ Terry Goldie, *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 157.

⁵⁰ Suzanne Owen, "Unsettled Natives," 221.

⁵¹ Suzanne Owen, "The Demise of the Beothuk as a Past Still Present", *Journal of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religion* 2, no. 1 (2015): 119–20.

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