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Beothuks and Methodists

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RESEARCH NOTE

Beothuks and Methodists

THE EXTINCT BEOTHUK INDIANS of Newfoundland continue to intrigue and puzzle anthropologists and historians.[1] Most discussions have included wonderment that this population kept itself almost entirely aloof for several centuries from the European fishermen and settlers on the island, and maintained its defiant attitude to the end in the early 19th century. There seem to have been no peaceful exchanges of goods or friendly relations after the contacts in the early 17th and perhaps the 16th centuries. The evidence for whites living with the Beothuks, willingly or not, is dubious. There are no known cases of intermarriage or even of sexual relations between whites and Beothuks, and thus no *métis* or individuals of mixed race who might have functioned as go-betweens. Even the rare cases of adoption of orphaned Beothuk children led to no friendly intercourse as far as we know. The reasons for this avoidance pattern by the Beothuks, as well as for their refusal to adopt firearms and European cod-fishing technology or to engage in the fur trade, remain subjects of speculation. Whatever the explanations, the Beothuks chose to maintain their geographical and social distance from the Europeans. Their "strategy of withdrawal"[2] was aberrant in terms of the usual pattern of contact and acculturation among New World aboriginal groups.

It has been pointed out that there was no missionary influence, English or French, on the Beothuks, and that this is a unique situation in the Northeast. This has led a number of authors writing about the fate of the Beothuks to speculate on what might have happened had missionaries been able to reach them and convert them to Christianity.[3] The examples of the Moravians in Labrador and the Jesuits in New France have been offered as illustrations of such success. There will of course never be convincing evidence that the Beothuks could have

I thank Dr. Ralph Pastore (History, Memorial University) for comments on an earlier draft of this article, and Dr. Françoy Raynauld (Sociology and Anthropology, Concordia University) for helpful discussions. Also Mrs. Ingeborg Marshall (St. John's), and Mrs. Rosemary Seton, Archivist at the School of African and Oriental Studies, London, for their assistance in verifying details in several of the letters published here; and the British Library Newspaper Library, and Dr. Patrick O'Flaherty (English, Memorial University) for other help.

1 See, for example, Françoy Raynauld, "Les pêcheurs et les colons anglais n'ont pas exterminé les Béothuks de Terre-Neuve", *Recherches Amérindiennes au Québec*, XIV (1984), pp. 45-59; Frederick W. Rowe, *Extinction: the Beothuks of Newfoundland* (Toronto, 1977); L.F.S. Upton, "The Extermination of the Beothuks of Newfoundland", *Canadian Historical Review*, LVIII, 2(June 1977), pp. 133-53; Upton, "The Beothuks: Questions and Answers", *Acadiensis*, VII, 2(Spring 1978), pp. 150-5.

2 Upton, "The Extermination", p. 135.

3 William Wilson, *Newfoundland and its Missionaries* (Cambridge, Mass., 1866), p. 318; Rowe, "Extinction", p. 116; Upton, "The Extermination", p. 133.

been "saved" in either the ethnic or spiritual sense had missionaries made contact with them before their demise. Nevertheless it is worthwhile to assess the interest, or lack of interest, that the several religious organizations operating in Newfoundland displayed towards the conversion of these Indians. This topic does not seem to have been adequately explored through research in the ecclesiastical archives of the denominations in question. But certainly one religious group, the Methodists, in the first decades of the 19th century was for a time interested in making direct or indirect contact with the Beothuks.

The main purpose here is to draw attention in brief form to several letters written to their superiors in London by Methodist missionaries stationed in Newfoundland in the early 19th century. Three of the letters seem to have gone unnoticed until now, while the essence of a fourth letter has been published earlier but in a somewhat different form.[4] Reliable documents concerning the Beothuks are not abundant, and these materials do not offer any major new insights into the history of this group of aborigines. The real value of these letters is in illuminating, however indistinctly, the attitudes of members of one denomination towards the Beothuks at a time when there was still optimism that they could be persuaded to adapt themselves to European civilization and Christianity.

Methodist interest in the Beothuks goes back at least as far as 1809 when Dr. Thomas Coke, the general superintendent of the committee in England charged with missionary work overseas, wrote John Rimmington, the preacher at Harbour Grace, asking him to make inquiries at Bonavista about the native Indians. The response was not encouraging:

> Yours of the 28th of April 1809 came to hand on the 18th of July....I have attended to your request, and have gone to Bonavista: and although I could not find any Indians there, I found a people prepared for the Gospel...[5]

The following year two preachers at Carbonear again wrote the missionary committee on the subject:

> With regard to the native Indians of this island, it is not in our power to do any thing, as they remain on the North part of the land, perhaps one hundred leagues from where we are. It will require a strong effort from the government to effect such a work. The interior part of the country has never been properly explored. A vessel should be fitted out for the purpose,

4 Letters and Reports, North America, Methodist Missionary Society, [MMS:LR]. These documents are now held in the School of African and Oriental Studies, University of London. See also Public Archives of Canada, Microfilm Series A-251 - A-283.

5 J. Rimmington, S. M'Dowell and W. Ellis to Thomas Coke, 21 October 1809, *The Methodist Magazine*, XXXIII (1810), p. 86.

> and should lie in wait on the sea-coast to meet with them. This, we conceive, would be the most likely method to reach them.[6]

The missionaries were saying, in effect, that the problem should be left in the hands of the colonial authorities. Given the small number of Methodist missionaries on the island and their precarious financial situation, this was a realistic view. The Methodists at this time were concentrated in a few outports in Conception Bay and even there were hard put to maintain a foothold among the settlers. Expansion to the north and south of the island, or even to St. John's, was barely being considered. It is not impossible that the Carbonear missionaries were aware of Lt. David Buchan's planned expedition up the Exploits River which started off in January 1811, only a few months after their letter; Buchan and his group had spent the summer of 1810 waiting for the Indians to appear in the Bay of Exploits — as the missionaries had recommended — and had then decided to search for them in the interior. That expedition ended in disaster on the shores of Red Indian Lake, with two of Buchan's marines killed and no friendly intercourse to show for the effort.[7]

Despite this failure, there remained a latent interest in the Beothuks among the missionaries in Newfoundland. Rumours about violence between whites and Indians were current and must have been familiar to the missionaries. In 1816 one of them, Sampson Busby (1790-1850) wrote from his station at Carbonear an extremely vivid account of an alleged massacre of a group of Beothuks by settlers. Busby, a Yorkshireman, had been sent to Newfoundland in 1813 and remained there until late 1816 when he removed to Prince Edward Island. Two years before writing this account, in a description of general conditions in Newfoundland dated 4 January 1814, he had informed his superiors in London that "the aborigines have never been civilized but remain in their original state of barbarism & independence".[8] On 16 January 1816, in the course of a long letter to the Wesleyan Missionary Committee (as it was now called) he decided to bring to their attention — perhaps for the first time officially — the mistreatment of the natives by some of the settlers:

> During my labours in this place, I have had the happiness to witness the triumphant departure of 8 persons, a short account of whom I am preparing. But while I rejoice in the pleasing narrations of departed Saints, I cannot forbear to grieve at the painful details of the murdered natives — Many instances of cruelty I have heard, but the following short account of one in particular, exceeds them all — and as these things have been but

6 S MacDowell and W. Ellis, 23 November 1810 (Missionary Intelligence), *The Methodist Magazine*, XXXIV (1811), p. 628.

7 James P. Howley, *The Beothucks or Red Indians. The Aboriginal Inhabitants of Newfoundland* (Cambridge, 1915), pp. 72-85.

8 No. 69, Box 1, MMS:LR.

too common, I see no reason to doubt its truth — Towards the North West of this Island, the Natives have frequently been seen & cruelly treated by Europeans, even shot, without the least remorse — retaliation, at all opportunities, might be expected — I understand that about seven yrs. ago — a young English fisherman, being on their coast, became a victim of their resentment — The Brother of the deceased, determined on revenge, the following Winter took with him 7 others as wicked as he, with fire-arms, ammunition, and dogs to seek the friendless race, & avenge his brother's murder. After traveling three successive days & nights toward the supposed place of retreat, they discovered on the third evening a well-beaten path, following which they soon perceived a smell of Smoke, & on looking around discovered at a little distance a large Indian town — in order to effect their malicious designs, they placed themselves in different situations until morning; — When an aged man, his hair as white as wool, appeared with a rod in his hand, & began to measure a Canoe which he was building. At this venerable man, from the different quarters of his (before) peaceful abode, was fired the life destroying metal. This horrid alarm drew forth an amazed group of unhappy mortals, headed by a kind of chief or king, who, surrounded by the multitude, ascended a scaffold, but by the continued & incessant firing of the merciless destroyers, he soon fell, & his affrighted people fled for shelter to the adjacent woods & snow: but not before many were destroyed, and soon none left but such as could make no resistance. In this condition the wealth of the Town became an easy prey to the rapacious murderers, who, seizing the opportunity, entered the houses, walking over the dead bodies of their recent possessors, loaded their dogs with valuable furs, to a great amount, and went off with infernal triumph. Returning, they were met in the path by two Indians, who, bowing to the ground, seemed to indicate their capture & submission, these instantly became victims to their insatiable malice — proceeding onward, they shortly met a pregnant female, whose supplicating posture cried aloud for mercy, but she no mercy found — going on, they began to suspect some danger, by the whining of their dogs — getting upon an eminence, they observed a number of Indians buried to the neck in snow; these likewise were soon cut off, and for the rest of the way, they saw no more of them — This is one recital, out of many, from which my heart has ached for these poor creatures.

Does not their blood cry aloud to Heaven? Such treatment has so confirmed their hatred to the Europeans, that all attempts to civilize them have hitherto failed — Please excuse me thus intruding upon your time.[9]

Many questions spring to mind about this account. Who were Busby's in-

9 No. 82, Box 1, MMS:LR. The text was much modified in London and many words and phrases were cut or rewritten. Busby's original wording is reproduced here.

formants? Was their story based on personal knowledge or on hearsay? How accurately did Busby report what he had heard? Did the massacre occur as recently as seven years before? Is this a description of a single incident, or a composite of several? Unfortunately these questions cannot be answered. Certainly there are some familiar aspects, particularly the theme of retaliation and revenge which occurs in other reports of encounters between Europeans and Beothuks. A naval officer, Lieutenant Pulling, in 1792 described how eight Europeans (the same number involved in Busby's story) had sought to avenge the killing of another white in 1790 by travelling 80 miles in four days with their dogs (again, very similar to Busby's description) to find an Indian encampment; they then plundered the furs in the wigwams, but claimed (perhaps falsely, Pulling thought) to have allowed all the people to escape.[10] It is also reminiscent in one respect of the story told to James P. Howley in the late 19th century by the Police Inspector Grimes, involving an 18th century settler taking revenge for the killing of his brother, although the rest of the details are different.[11] Again, part of the Busby account resembles two others cited by Howley in which fishermen or fur-trappers surprised groups of Beothuks asleep in their wigwams and killed them.[12] (One wonders, incidentally, how Busby's whites kept their dogs from barking throughout the night and alarming the sleeping Indians). But, alongside these common features, there are some unusual items in Busby's story that do not occur in others: the white-haired old man, the use of a measuring rod to build a canoe, the "chief or king" who ascended a scaffold during the attack, and the Indians buried to their necks in the snow. These unique details lend a rather original flavour to Busby's account, though not necessarily a more veracious one.

The apparent statement of the whites decapitating the Indians buried in the snow also appears strange, since there is no other record of Europeans in Newfoundland taking Beothuk heads (although the reverse was of course true). However, the phrase "these likewise were soon cut off" is ambiguous and may mean simply that their lives, not their heads, were ended or "cut off"; the use of the word "likewise" favours this interpretation, since there is no mention of cutting off the heads of the Indians killed earlier in the attack on the "town". It is also not clear that the Beothuks who "could make no resistance" after the attack were killed.

These uncertainties and ambiguities suggest that Busby's account may well be as unreliable as most or all of the other mythic descriptions of Beothuk massacres. As in many frontier situations, stories of massacres of natives were exaggerated because killing aborigines was for some individuals a source of pride: "As the rum flowed, so the stories must have grown by competitive exaggeration

10 John Hewson, ed., "The Pulling and Liverpool Manuscripts", unpublished manuscript, Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's.

11 Howley, "The Beothucks", p. 274.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 268-9.

from isolated encounters to wholesale massacres".[13] Based as it was on hearsay rather than personal knowledge by Busby, his account should not be uncritically treated as a description of a genuine historical incident. Its real interest lies in two other directions. First, it no doubt reflects fairly faithfully the kinds of rumours and folk-tales circulating in Newfoundland at the time (and, given the robust verbal tradition, losing nothing in the telling) about white-Beothuk relations. Second, it shows a sense of shock and shame on the part of one missionary that such violence could occur, and thus calls for a slight modification of Upton's observation that "public reaction to the capture of Mary March [in 1819] showed that for the first time 'feelings of humanity' were no longer confined to visiting British officers".[14]

One of the odd features about this account is that, although most of the rest of Busby's letter of 16 January 1816 was published in London,[15] the description of the "massacre" was not. It is clear from the editorial marks and rewordings on the original document that it was at first intended for publication, but was deleted before going to press. Possibly the editors had second thoughts about its reliability. Since it was founded on hearsay about a crime supposed to have occurred some seven years earlier, committed by unknown persons in an unnamed place, they may have hesitated to circulate such a story without verification. Certainly they did not hesitate to publish examples of the evils of black slavery in the West Indies at this time, but there the facts could be more easily verified than in Newfoundland. Busby's motives in relating the story are unclear. Although he does not call explicitly for a missionary to go among the Beothuks, he quite clearly intended to provoke horror and pity among his superiors in London. He may have been hoping that some kind of pressure could be put on the colonial authorities to afford more protection to the natives. At any rate, Busby's account received no publicity, and has remained in obscurity to the present time.

A few years later, in a report prepared for the use of the Committee in England that summarized the religious, economic and social situation in Newfoundland, an anonymous author touched briefly on the Beothuks.[16] It is interesting that, again, there is no direct suggestion of sending a missionary among them.

> The Aborigines, though very little known, are supposed not to be num-

13 Upton, "The Extermination", p. 151.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 143.

15 *The Methodist Magazine*, XXXIX (1816), pp. 469-70.

16 "Observations &c on the island of Newfoundland", March, 1819, unnumbered item, Box 2, MMS:LR. This remarkably astute analysis of social and economic conditions in Newfoundland has not, to my knowledge, been published. Although unsigned, it is certainly the work of the Rev. George Cubit (or Cubitt) (1791-1850) who had been stationed in St. John's from 1816 until he returned to England at the end of 1818.

> erous. They are seldom seen, & are very savage. They differ from the Esquimaux of the Labrador coast, and from what is said of them, they may be regarded as a distinctive tribe of North American Indians. To the Southward of the Island there are some Indians who are more tractable, indeed, many of them are Roman Catholics, but these are not to be considered as being originally natives of the island, — they come over from the Nova Scotian, & Canadian Coasts.

The document then quotes in full the proclamation that had been issued in 1813 by the Governor of Newfoundland, Sir Richard Keats, which forbade any ill-treatment of the Beothuks and offered rewards for any successful attempts to establish friendly intercourse on a firm and settled footing. The writer comments:

> It does not however appear that any good effects have resulted from this measure. The native Indians continue as separate from the British population as ever, and, it is to be feared, are likely to continue so. It is said that formerly there was some intercourse established, but that its cessation was caused by the cruelty of the (then French) settlers. Be this as it may, desirable as it is, that a familiar communication should be opened with these the native possessors of the island, they are at present unknow[n] in almost everything that concerns them, except that such a class of people is in existence.

By an ironic coincidence, in the same month (March 1819) that these pessimistic words were written in England, the next and perhaps most dramatic incident in the final phase of Beothuk-white relations took place on a frozen lake in northern Newfoundland.

In March 1819 a Beothuk woman was captured in the interior of the island by a party of settlers after a violent encounter in which one Indian man was killed. She was Demasduit or, as she was called by the Europeans, Mary March. Shortly after her capture she was brought to St. John's. The governor of Newfoundland, backed by the colonial authorities in England, was anxious to obtain living individuals who could later be returned to their people as intermediaries in a project of pacification and reconciliation. Demasduit spent several weeks in St. John's, the object of much curiosity and attention, and was later in the summer taken northward so that she could be returned to her people. The plan failed because the Beothuks did not appear on the coast, and in January 1820 she died of consumption on board the naval vessel that had been charged with the project. Her body was carried inland by the crew led by Captain Buchan and left in an abandoned Beothuk storehouse.

While she was in St. John's the Methodist clergy held their annual District Meeting in the town. Some of the clergymen were interested enough in the cap-

tive to visit her and take her to service in their chapel, and at least two of them wrote accounts of her in letters to London. The author of the first letter was a Welshman, John Lewis (1788-1866), who was then stationed in Burin, an outport in Placentia Bay. He had come to Newfoundland in 1814 and after several earlier postings was sent in 1817 to open a mission in Burin. His description of Demasduit is particularly valuable because it was written in St. John's on 5 June, very shortly after he had seen her and before he returned to his station in Burin. It is thus the only known first-hand written record of Demasduit's personal appearance by someone who had seen her and spoken to her. The extract from his letter to the Missionary Committee of the Wesleyan Missionary Society is reproduced here with its original spelling and total absence of punctuation:

> It may be interesting to you to hear that one of the Aborigenes of this Island was taken this spring by a party of men on a hunting excurtion this was a young Woman appearantly about 23 year of age I had several interviews with her She was of the most pleasing Countenance about the medium sise her complection was not much darker than some English women who are employed in out of Door work as to figur she was well made and her hand was as fine and as delicate as any Ladys that ever I saw her manner was mild and of a cheerful disposition we had her to Chapel on Sunday morning and she was taken to the Church in the after noon She behaved as well as any person there but took no apearant notice of eith [sic] the Singing or the Preaching We could not discover that she had any *idea of a Deity* this woman was taken (I belive) in the Bay of Exploits She was in company with a Man who was (unfortunately) killed by the Men who took her this will I fear be much against a reconsiliation altho done in self defence yet the much Ingury suffered by this unfortunate people from time to time by the Setlers on this cost when taken into the account with the present sircumstance will make them more shy I think that had a Man been caught it would have been better than a woman and espesialy a woman taken from her husband a husband who lost his life as he thought in defence of his wife this I fear will excite jealousy in the people to whom she belongs All the Respectable inhabitance of this Town manifasted every atention to this interesting stranger they have Loaded her with presents gave her an abundance of Clothes and of other things that were likely to be acceptable to her people She is sent back to the neighbourhood from whence she was taken and is to be kept until some Steps be taken to restore her to her own tribe with the hope the Kindness shown to her will convince her people that we are not their enimes but friends I have understood that the Governer is about to send a Man of War to troy to get an interview with some of this people and to bring some Men round here if this will not be successful the Gentlemen of this Town

> have formed a resolution to send a party of men there in the winter who would be able (I hope then) to find them out as the Lakes and Rivers will be frozen and traveling in the interior much easier a Gentleman from whose providence much is to be expect [sic] has offered his valued Servises in this Labour of Love[17]

This letter contains a number of interesting points. The account of the reactions of the people of St. John's is of some interest, particularly the fact that she was taken to the Methodist chapel as well as to the Anglican church, and that (as the next letter also shows) her behaviour and her attitude towards religion were closely observed. There is also something intriguing in the remark that because she was a woman she would be a less useful intermediary to her people than a man would be; the use of the words "excite jealousy" might mean that she would be suspected of having been violated or in some way defiled while in captivity, and that this might impede her reintegration into her group. The most important part of the account, however, is the description of her physical features and personality. A number of descriptions of Demasduit have been published over the years, but they all seem to be derived from the one recorded in 1820 by Sir Hercules Robinson, the naval commander in Newfoundland,[18] who never saw her himself. He had obtained his information from conversations with the Church of England missionary, John Leigh, in the fall of 1820, and he apparently wrote it from memory.[19] Leigh was the missionary in Twillingate to whom Demasduit had been brought by her captors in March 1819; she stayed with him until he accompanied her to St. John's later in the spring, and he made a well-known vocabulary of Beothuk words obtained from her.[20] Leigh does not seem to have written a description of her, and when he described her to Robinson she had been dead nearly a year. Robinson's account was admittedly imperfect and incomplete, having been written on shipboard in November 1820 while he was returning to England, and was not published until 1834. It is worth knowing, therefore, that the Leigh-Robinson description of Demasduit's physical appearance and personality is essentially confirmed by an independent witness, John Lewis.

As it happens, Demasduit is the only Beothuk of whom a portrait is known. It is a miniature on ivory, painted by Lady Hamilton, wife of Governor Sir

17 No. 57, Box 2, MMS:LR.

18 Capt. H. Robinson, R.N., "Private Journal kept on Board H.M.S. Favorite on the Newfoundland Station, 1820 ms.", *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, IV (1834), pp. 207-20; Howley, "The Beothucks", pp. 127-8, 259.

19 Howley, "The Beothucks", p. 127.

20 Leigh took her to St. John's to be trained as an interpreter so that she might be used as an intermediary in reaching her people. He hoped for help from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in this aim. The Society was appalled at Leigh's involvement, however indirect, in what was perceived as an act of violence. See Upton, "The Extermination", p. 142.

Charles Hamilton, while Demasduit was in St. John's in the early summer of 1819. After having disappeared for many years the portrait was recently acquired by the Public Archives of Canada.[21] As Ingeborg Marshall has shown, it was this painting, or rather poor copies of it, that later authors erroneously published as portraits of Shanawdithit, the Beothuk woman captured in 1823. No portrait was ever made of Shanawdithit, apparently; we have only written descriptions by eye-witnesses. It is fortunate therefore that for Demasduit there are a portrait from life and two documentary descriptions of her appearance with no important discrepancies between them. Lewis says that her figure was "well made", while Robinson calls her "tall and rather stout". Both agree that her facial features were attractive and her complexion rather light; Robinson makes it a light copper colour, while Lewis compares her to a weather-beaten Englishwoman. Her hands are fine and delicate, both say, and her personality attractive. Both agree on her age, about 23. It is possible, of course, that Robinson had seen the painting Lady Hamilton had done in St. John's — certainly he was aware of its existence[22] — and that his description was also influenced to some degree by that charming portrait of the "interesting stranger" who captivated the town during her brief stay there.

The other Methodist clergyman who visited Demasduit in St. John's and wrote about her in a letter to the Committee in London was John Pickavant (1792-1848). He had come to Newfoundland in 1814 and served there in various circuits, being Chairman of the District for some years, and returned to England in 1843. He wrote from his station at Carbonear on 10 July 1819, shortly after leaving St. John's.[23] His letter has a somewhat different emphasis. Although, like Lewis, he was interested in Demasduit's views about a Deity, and in the possibility of the authorities employing her as an intermediary, he does not describe her physical appearance or her personality. The most interesting aspect of this letter is the attempt to collect and transcribe a short Beothuk vocabulary. This vocabulary, restricted to 14 words and amateurish in transcription, adds little to our limited knowledge of the Beothuk language. Most of the words seem consistent with their equivalents given in the three other known Beothuk vocabularies.[24] Unfortunately the pages are damaged in places and some words are difficult to read at present; the gaps or uncertainties are indicated by square brackets below, and in several cases I have tentatively inserted what may be the missing words.

It will no doubt give you much pleasure to hear that another attempt is in

21 Ingeborg Marshall, "The Miniature Portrait of Mary March", *The Newfoundland Quarterly*, LXXIII, 3 (Fall 1977), pp. 4-7.

22 Robinson, "Private Journal", p. 216.

23 No. 68, Box 2, MMS:LR.

24 See Howley, "The Beothucks", pp. 297-321 for the various vocabularies collected in the 18th and 19th centuries. Pickavant may have believed he was the first to collect one.

contemplation to effect an intercourse with the native Indians of this Island for the purpose of civilization &c — The following particulars from the Newfoundland Royal Gazette contain the substance of what has been done — "At a public meeting convened at the Court House, on Sunday Sennight '(June 6th)' after divine service, Francis Forbes, Esq. stated to the gentlemen assembled that they had been called together to take into consideration what measures they might think proper to adopt in respect to the native Indian woman (there present,) and to discuss the means they might deem it expedient to pursue, in order to open a friendly intercourse with the tribe of native Indians to which the woman belongs. Mr Forbes then took a short and [?feeling] view of the unprotected condition of the aborigines of this Island, whose [?lives] have in so many instances fallen a sacrifice to the wanton injustice and [?barbarity] of many of the European settlers of this Island; and commented on the duties that consequently devolved on this public community, to rescue that unprotected race of human beings from a recurrence of the like cruel sufferings.

"Mr Forbes then stated that he had been given to understand by the Revd. Mr Leigh, that his Excellency the Governor contemplated sending H.M.S. Drake to Green Bay, for the purpose of endeavouring to open a communication with the Indians, in the course of the ensuing summer; and in the event of a possible failure of that object, he would submit to the consideration of the gentlemen then present, whether the inhabitants would, during the winter, [ ] to effect that object, which could then be pursued under the superior advantage of the Indian woman accompanying the party, at a period when she would, [?from] instructions she would in the interim receive, be pretty well qualified to explain satisfactorily, our intentions to her countrymen.

"The gentlemen present concurring in the object of the meeting, then begged that the Chief Justice would take the Chair, that the subject might be considered and resolutions taken thereon. Mr Forbes accordingly took the chair, when it was resolved as follows. — 1st. That the gentlemen present do presently open a Subscription for the purpose of defraying the expence attendant on the prosecution of the object before stated. 2d. That a Committee of five gentlemen be appointed by ballot, to adopt the necessary measures in order to open a friendly communication with the native Indians in the course of the ensuing winter, in the event of that object not being effected in the ensuing summer, and that the Committee be empowered to add to their number as they may deem fit, and that any three of their number be competent to act. 3d. That the Revd. Mr Leigh be considered one of the Committee independent of the five to be elected by ballot. The following gentlemen were then elected to be the Committee — Francis Forbes, Esq. Mr William Haynes, Dr Carson, Mr T.H. Brooking, Mr James Simms. — A Subscription list was then handed about and £120

immediately subscribed. The list still remains open for further subscriptions".—[25]

The woman refered to in the above extract was brought to St. John's a few weeks ago. — One of her unhappy tribe (a man, supposed to be her husband) was killed in the act of taking her — this cruelty is made punishable by law but it is said to have been done in self-defence. — I had several interviews with the woman during my stay in St. John's at the time of our District Meeting. After using various methods (for no one here understands their language) with a design of finding out what views she had of a Supreme being, I was sorry to find she could not enter into my design — with difficulty I got her to count numbers as far as 10 in her own language — and likewise to name several other things which I presented to her. — The following were terms she used. — One. Yath-thee. — Two. O-de-sike. — Three. Sin-dic — Four. Ta[ ]. — Five. Nene-ic. — Six. Besh-re-dic. — Seven. Oth-ro-dice. — Eight. An-de-zu [ ]. — Nine. Ya-tho-dutt. — Ten. Dun-now. — Boy. Bo-she-mish. — Girl. Emom [ ]. — Fire. Wood-rith. Dog. Mo-me-smitt. — As no satisfactory account has been given of the origin or language of this poor unhappy tribe, I have thought it well to send you the above terms as sometimes great discoveries are made by means of little things. —

What purposes Lewis and Pickavant had in mind in sending these two accounts to London are not clear. Methodist missionaries were of course always encouraged by the Committee in England to write home frequently and to describe the country, the people and the work. It is possible that Lewis and Pickavant merely added the information about Demasduit to their letters as an interesting incident. In the case of Pickavant there were perhaps some philological leanings inspiring him to hope his vocabulary might be of scholarly use. Or they may have wanted to remind the Missionary Committee, without making any overt or unwelcome recommendations, that a field of activity was still open among the heathen on the island. Evidently none of the other Methodist clergymen present at the District Meeting mentioned Demasduit in their official correspondence. Nevertheless, one consequence of the Demasduit incident was that the Missionary Society of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in England renewed its interest in reaching the Beothuks. Whether this was a direct product of the Lewis and Pickavant letters, or resulted from the more general publicity the incident had received in the British press, is not known. According to William Wilson, the historian of Newfoundland Methodism, it was the arrival of Demasduit in St. John's that induced the Wesleyan Missionary Committee to insert in their Report for the year 1820 the following recommendation to the missionaries

25 The brief account of this meeting of 30 May in Howley, "The Beothucks", p. 108, seems to be an excerpt from an article in the *Newfoundland Royal Gazette* (St. John's), but copies of this publication for 1819 have not survived.

in the Newfoundland District: "The attention of the public has recently been turned to the aboriginal inhabitants of the interior, and, should any opening to these long isolated tribes occur, the brethren are directed to avail themselves of it to attempt their instruction".[26] No action seems to have been taken by the missionaries in the field, however, and it was apparently three years before the British Methodists were again reminded of the Beothuk problem.

In the spring of 1823 three starving Beothuk women were captured, or gave themselves up, in the northern part of the island near Notre Dame Bay. They were a mother and her two daughters. One daughter was Shanawdithit, the famous "last of the Beothuks". They were taken by the fur-trappers who found them to the local magistrate in Twillingate and from there sent to St. John's where they arrived in mid-June. They remained in St. John's under the Governor's protection for several weeks, and as in the case of Demasduit it was hoped they would serve "to open an amicable intercourse" with the surviving Indians in the wild.[27] Because of their precarious state of health, however, it was decided to return them immediately to the neighbourhood of the place where they had been found. This was done in July, but the women did not or could not rejoin their people. Instead, they returned to the white settlers. The mother and one daughter died shortly afterwards, but the third woman, Shanawdithit (named Nancy by the settlers) survived until 1829. For some years she lived, more or less forgotten, in the household of John Peyton, Jr., the magistrate at Twillingate, but in 1828 she was taken back to St. John's by William Epps Cormack under the protection of the "Boeothuck Institution" he had founded.[28] There she died in 1829 of consumption. Much of what we know of Beothuk culture and language was obtained from Shanawdithit in interviews that Cormack (who might without exaggeration be viewed as a proto-anthropologist) had with her in the last year of her life.

There are a number of descriptions of Shanawdithit in circulation, some of them written by people who knew her in Twillingate or St. John's, others recorded years after at second hand. Probably the best, and best-known, description of her and the other two women captured with her is that of the Rev. William Wilson, published in 1866. Wilson (1798-1870) was a young Englishman who had been sent out to Newfoundland in 1820, and in 1823 he was a Methodist missionary in the Bonavista circuit. In late May of that year he was in St. John's attending the annual District Meeting, and was delayed long enough in getting a passage by sea to his new station at Grand Bank, in Fortune Bay, that he was able to meet the three Beothuk women in the Court House

26 Wilson, "Newfoundland", p. 312.

27 D. Buchan to J. Peyton, 18 June 1823, in Howley, "The Beothucks", p. 170.

28 Cormack (1796-1868) was the first European to cross the island of Newfoundland, in 1822. His principal aim in this journey was to locate any surviving Beothuks, and he later led several other fruitless expeditions into the interior. See F.A. Bruton, ed., *Narrative of a Journey across the Island of Newfoundland in 1822* (London, 1928).

where they were lodged. Many years later when he was in New Brunswick he published an account of this meeting in his book marking the centenary of Methodism in Newfoundland, and this is the basis for most later descriptions; Howley quoted it in its entirety in his classic study of the Beothuks.[29]

What seems to have been overlooked by writers who have discussed the 1823 incident is that there are at least two other versions of this meeting set down by Wilson. He published one in 1839 when he was living in Newport, Nova Scotia, and added to it a short note on the eventual fate of the three captives.[30] The other version has not hitherto been published. It is in the form of a letter written 12 August 1823 from Grand Bank, addressed to the Wesleyan Missionary Committee in London. In the letter he gives an extract from his Journal (as Methodist missionaries were encouraged to do), and this part of his letter is given below. Once again, unfortunately, the original document has been damaged and some words are missing or unclear. These gaps are indicated in square brackets; in each case I have tentatively inserted, as before, what may be the missing words:

> 1823 Extracts from my Journal —
> June 23 St. Johns — Last week there were brought here, three of the Aborigine inhabitants of this country, which had been taken last March, in the neighbourhood of Twilingate by two men, who were in the country seeking after fur — This morning Messr Walsh Ellis and I went to see them
> there was one old woman, and two young ones — The old woman was sitting on the floor clothed in a skin. One of the young women was ill in bed; the Doctors say she is in a consumption — The other is in perfect health and a verry fine [?looking] person, appearently about 23 years of age [?they are] of a Mulatto colour. I could see [?nothing] savage or barbarous, either in their manners [?or in] their countenance — The old woman appears to have passed through much trouble — The young woman has a verry pleasing countenance a finer set of teeth I never saw; and her manners also are pleasing — I shewed her my watch, she put it to her ear and seemed much pleased with the noise it made — A Gentleman present pointd to his fingers and countd ten she did it after him; but more than ten she could not articulate but in her own language — He then shewed her a looking Glass — and she distorted her countenance in a most ugley manner, that she might enjoy the pleasure of looking at herself in the glass — But I was most struck with the manner in which she used a black lead pencil she drew a Deer verry correctly and what is most remarkable she began at the tail. —
>
> When I came away I shook hands with them all and wished them good

29 Wilson, "Newfoundland", pp. 312-4; Howley, "The Beothucks", pp. 171-2.

30 "Aborigines of Newfoundland", *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* (n.s.), LXII (1839), pp. 469-70.

> by and they did the same — I believe it is not yet known when they will be sent back to their own country.
>
> They appear to have minds capable of of [*sic*] receiving instruction, and could an intercourse once be opened with this degraded part of our species; and the gospel be sent amongst them, no doubt but amongst them as well as amongst long neglected and despised Hottentots, many would soon be brought to worship the God that made the world, and to seek salvation through that Saviour, who has bought them [?with] his [?blood]. —[31]

The letter's contents do not add greatly to our knowledge of Shanawdithit and her family. There are a few details, however, that do not occur in Wilson's 1839 and 1866 accounts. In these it is stated that the older daughter was ill, but only in the 1823 letter is it said that she was suffering from consumption. This is also the only place where it is mentioned that the old woman "appears to have passed through much trouble", but it is not clear whether Wilson was commenting on her physical or her mental state. Again, their complexions are here described as being "of a Mulatto colour" rather than swarthy, tawny or copper coloured as in his other two accounts. He seems to say here that he could see nothing "savage" or "barbarous" in their manners or countenances, whereas in 1866 he describes the old woman as having "the look and action of a savage". He does not refer in 1823 to Shanawdithit's stature, although in 1839 he says she is "tall" while in 1866 she is "nearly six feet high" — an illustration perhaps of the tendency in the 19th century to exaggerate the size of the Beothuks. Missing from the 1823 document, oddly, is the story of the doctor's attempt to bleed the sick daughter, and the resulting furor. Finally, in the 1823 letter Wilson believes they and the other aborigines could be successfully Christianized were a missionary sent among them. In this respect his is the most openly evangelical of all the letters reproduced here.

Perhaps the real contribution of the 1823 letter is to bring out the point that the much-quoted 1866 description is probably *not* an exact or complete extract from Wilson's Journal, as is generally assumed. The variations in the three accounts discussed here strongly suggest that in each case Wilson was consulting his original Journal but each time expressing himself in a somewhat different way; and perhaps, in the later publications, adding some things from memory or from hearsay, if not from imagination. Only an examination of his Journal for 1823 (whose whereabouts, if it has survived, seems to be unknown) will resolve this question and let us know just what he saw and recorded on the day he met the last three Beothuks known to history.[32] It appears that the other two

31 No. 141, Box 4, MMS:LR.

32 It is interesting that Howley, "The Beothucks", p. 260, mentions some details from Wilson's diary that do not occur in the latter's 1866 book. This suggests that Howley may have had access to Wilson's Journal, although this is not clearly indicated.

Methodist clergymen who accompanied Wilson that day (William Ellis and John Walsh) did not write anything about the visit in their official correspondence although like Wilson they may have recorded it in their personal Journals.

The 1823 meeting in St. John's was probably the last occasion on which any Methodist clergyman came face-to-face with a Beothuk. Shortly after the three women left St. John's the mother and older daughter died, and Shanawdithit spent most of the rest of her life in the distant outport of Twillingate which was then outside the Methodists' geographical range. If any of them saw her again in St. John's in the last year of her life they seem to have left no official record of it. Hope lingered on in some minds. As late as 1827 another Methodist missionary living at Grand Bank, Simeon Noall (1795-1850), was excited at meeting on one of his peregrinations into Hermitage Bay a band of Micmac Indians from Bay d'Espoir; he saw them as a means of eventually contacting the "Red Indians" who, he assured his superiors in London, still existed in the interior of the island in spite of reports to the contrary.[33] Nothing came, however, of this suggestion, and Noall failed to find the Micmacs on his next visit to Hermitage Bay.

The documents cited here show that in the early 19th century there was, on the part of the Methodist Church in England and of at least some Methodist missionaries in Newfoundland, an intermittent hope of bringing Christianity to the surviving Beothuks and of thus saving them from the dangers of contact with the European settlers. Nothing came of these hopes. Between about 1810 and 1820 the Missionary Committee in London seems to have lost interest in, or sight of, the Beothuks. One reason for this may have been the death of Thomas Coke, the great enthusiast of missions to the heathen, in 1814 on shipboard off Ceylon while on his way to the East to convert Indians of a different kind. A more substantial reason, probably, is that the financial and human resources available to diffuse Methodism in Newfoundland were scarce, particularly after the Napoleonic wars. Newfoundland was a minor, expensive, and not very promising field in the ambitious scheme of overseas expansion that the British Methodists were now envisaging, and the Beothuks must have been nearly invisible within this scheme. Reliant as they were on continued financial support from England, and always short-handed for preachers, the Methodist leadership in Newfoundland may well have felt that their resources would be better spent on the growing settler population, which generally lacked religious services outside the larger communities, than on aborigines who were few in numbers, difficult to reach, and dangerous. The perceived threat of the growing Irish population and of the Roman Catholic Church was probably another incentive to concentrate their efforts on the Europeans; in those years Methodism saw itself as the main bulwark to the spread of Romanism among the many Protestant communities that were without regular clergy. Nor did the other denominations have better re-

33 No. 179 pt. 2, 1 August 1827, Box 6, MMS:LR; also *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* (n.s.), LI (1828), p. 275.

sults: John Inglis, the Anglican bishop of Nova Scotia (in whose diocese Newfoundland then fell) met Shanawdithit in Twillingate in 1827 and thought a new attempt should be made to reach any other survivors, but it was Cormack, not his own clergy, who was stimulated to act on this suggestion.[34]

Neither Busby's letter of 1816 nor the later ones of Lewis, Pickavant, and Wilson were published in *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine.* A closer study of the Methodist Missionary Society records might throw some light on this failure to publicize the plight of the Beothuks. It may have been due at times to a lack of enthusiasm for the idea of converting these Indians, or a rational decision to stay away from a cause the Committee could not help, or even to a shortage of space in the magazine. As far as the Beothuks were concerned, therefore, the letters from Newfoundland yielded no practical results. But it is possible that they had their effect in another field. By 1822 the British Methodists had opened their first Indian mission in British America, among the Mohawks on the Grand River of Upper Canada, and were willing to promote other missions in North America. It may have been as a kind of reparation for not pursuing more vigorously the Beothuk opportunity that the Missionary Committee showed more activity in promoting a mission in Labrador. The state of irreligion on that coast, particularly among the southern Inuit exposed to the summer visits of Newfoundland, Canadian and American fishermen and to the small settler population, was well known and deplored. In 1820 the Committee gave the missionaries in Newfoundland directions to make enquiries and if possible establish a mission there (as well as among the Beothuks). After several preliminary visits in 1824 and 1825 which produced favourable recommendations, a missionary was sent in 1826 to "Esquimaux Bay" (Hamilton Inlet), but the man selected for the job was not suited for the rigours of Labrador life and returned home next year. Shortly afterwards the Methodists decided to close down the mission.[35] It is interesting to speculate on what might have happened had William Wilson, the writer of one of the letters reproduced here, been chosen instead for the Labrador work. As early as 1822 he had expressed his willingness to go to Labrador as a missionary, and he volunteered again in 1827 and even began to study the Inuit language. With his romantic interest in aborigines, his medical skills, energy, and unorthodox spirit, he might well have succeeded in establishing a mission in Labrador — or even among the Beothuks had circumstances been more favorable.

Some 30 years later the Methodists did return to Labrador, this time with greater success. But in the meantime there undoubtedly remained an undercurrent of regret or chagrin among some Methodists that nothing had been done for the Beothuks, who were now generally acknowledged to be extinct on the island

34 Howley, "The Beothucks", pp. 295-7; Upton, "The Extermination", p. 145.

35 Arminius Young, *One Hundred Years of Mission Work in the Wilds of Labrador* (London, 1931).

— although as late as 1866 Wilson thought some might still survive in some "sequestered spot" in the interior.[36] This bitter memory was expressed by another missionary, John Addy, in 1841 after visiting some Beothuk graves in Notre Dame Bay:

> How different a history should we have had of that once numerous athletic and warlike though friendly race, had Christianity controlled the propensities of the first settlers, and brought its benign influence to play upon dark and depraved minds of the "Red Man".[37]

An anonymous writer in England in 1868 was even more categorical about the lost opportunity:

> Had a Christian missionary gone to them, fifty years ago, in the name of Him who "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth", with tidings of peace and "good-will toward men", a fine race might have been preserved, making their native woods to echo their praises of the "Great Spirit". But the Boeothick is no more.[38]

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36 Wilson, "Newfoundland", p. 315.

37 No. 73, 9 November 1841, Box 13, MMS:LR.

38 J.I., "The Last of the Boeothicks, or Aborigines of Newfoundland", *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* (n.s.), LXXXI (1868), pp. 448-50. Compare this with a somewhat similar lament in Wilson, "Newfoundland", p. 318, which may have been the stimulus. The anonymous author was possibly Jabez Ingraham, who was a Methodist missionary in Newfoundland from 1840 to 1848, and the son-in-law of John Pickavant who wrote one of the letters reproduced here.