

“Murmuring Against God”: Inuit–Moravian Confrontations in Late Nineteenth-Century Labrador

Nigel Markham

Volume 36, Number 1, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082214ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082214ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1719-1726 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this note

Markham, N. (2021). “Murmuring Against God”: Inuit–Moravian Confrontations in Late Nineteenth-Century Labrador. *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 36(1), 87–115. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082214ar>

"Murmuring Against God": Inuit–Moravian Confrontations in Late Nineteenth-Century Labrador

Nigel Markham

Prosperity in spiritual things appears to be dependent upon external welfare. If all goes well, the Eskimo is very agreeable and apparently satisfactory to deal with. But if misfortune comes, and he cannot get what he wants at the store and on his own terms, difficulties and unpleasantness are sure to arise.

— *Periodical Accounts*, relating to the
Mission of the Church of the United Brethren¹

Introduction

By the late nineteenth century, Inuit living on the north coast of Labrador had a long and established history with the Moravian mission. The Moravians, a Protestant evangelical organization based in Saxony, settled in Labrador in 1771 with the aim of converting Inuit to Christianity.² Over time, the majority of coastal Inuit adopted the Christian faith and accepted the Moravians as teachers who had come to live among them.³ Although the mission was principally an evangelical organization, it was also a commercial enterprise. It operated trading stores at all its mission stations, initially to attract Inuit to the Moravians

so they might hear the gospel but also to help pay the costs of the mission. The evangelical and commercial arms of the mission operated somewhat independently of each other. The mission board based in Saxony determined religious doctrine and social practice and was the principal source of missionaries, while the financial, commercial, and logistical side of the Labrador mission was managed from London by the mission's British agency, the Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel.

The relationship between Inuit and the Moravians was complex and at times contentious. Among the most common conflicts were disagreements over matters of trade. Grievances often simmered below the surface, but in the late 1880s Inuit dissatisfaction with Moravian trade policy came to a head in a number of acrimonious confrontations that shook the mission to its core. These incidents were the result of long-standing Inuit grievances regarding the trade system, which were rooted in the suspicion that the trade was being managed principally for the benefit of the mission. This paper discusses the events that took place in Labrador with regard to Moravian trade practices in the late nineteenth century. The spirit of resistance evident in these protests contradicts the notion of Inuit passivity and submissiveness in the face of European authority; rather, it demonstrates a consistent willingness and ability of Inuit to stand up to perceived injustices in matters that affected their vital interests.

Missionary Traders

By the late nineteenth century, most Inuit living on the Labrador coast were members of Moravian congregations based in six settlements scattered along the coast at Hopedale, Zoar, Nain, Okak, Hebron, and Ramah. The people tended to live in these communities from Christmas to Easter, at the coldest time of year, when hunting opportunities were limited. The rest of the year Inuit were living in small camps scattered among the bays and islands, hunting and fishing, and returning to the settlements periodically to sell their produce and acquire provisions from the mission store.⁴ The stores had been a central fea-

ture of Moravian communities since the establishment of the first mission station at Nain in 1771 and were of vital importance to Inuit and missionaries alike. For Inuit, they provided a ready market for their fish, furs, and oil and a dependable year-round supply of imported trade goods such as rifles, ammunition, fishing gear, tools, cooking utensils, and foodstuffs such as flour, tea, and biscuits. For the Moravians, the trade both attracted Inuit to the mission and provided the principal means for paying its costs. It also gave the missionaries the resources needed to dispense charitable relief in times of want.⁵ The Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel (SFG), the London-based Moravian organization that had helped the mission broker its relationship with British authorities in the eighteenth century, had assumed responsibility for managing the trade and paying the cost of the mission. It continued in that capacity throughout the nineteenth century, acquiring ships, transporting missionaries, providing capital and materials for buildings, supplying produce for the stores, and selling Inuit products on the London markets.⁶ It was the SFG that established trade policy and set prices for both Inuit produce and foreign merchandise. From the beginning, trade had been an essential component of Inuit–Moravian relations and it remained so throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, it has been argued that while the Moravians' main objective was religious in nature, their principal relationship with Inuit was economic.⁷

Background

Almost from the start, the trade between the Moravians and Inuit was contentious. The barter trade was not a relationship of equals. The store set the price for both Inuit produce and imported European goods. Inuit had few alternatives to this system other than to take their business elsewhere, but in nineteenth-century Labrador there were limited options. By the 1850s numerous fishermen and traders visited the coast in the summertime and Inuit took full advantage of these, but few businesses maintained a year-round presence. The Hudson's

Bay Company (HBC) had acquired a post at Kibokok, south of Hopedale, in 1837 and operated it until 1879, and over the years this had attracted some Hopedale Inuit trade.⁸ Hunt and Henley had small operations at Ukkusiksalik (Davis Inlet) near Zoar and Paul's Island near Nain, both of which were bought out by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1869.⁹ As the HBC began to compete more vigorously with the Moravians for the Inuit trade in the far north it established a new but short-lived post at Saeglek (1867) north of Hebron and another at Nachvak (1868).¹⁰ Although these posts provided opportunities for some, they were not available to all Inuit. For the majority of Inuit living on the coast, the Moravian trade outlets remained a necessity. One significant impact of outside traders was that they caused Inuit to question more critically the terms of trade in the Moravian stores. Inuit were able to compare the prices offered for goods and produce. If they suspected they were being treated unfairly, distrust and resentment would result.

The conflict of opinions over prices given for produce and demanded for provisions would remain a central feature of Inuit–Moravian trade relations, but the issue that would cause the greatest rift was the matter of credit and debt. As long as game was abundant and Inuit hunters were doing well, provisions could be paid for and store accounts could be balanced. But even the most proficient hunter was at the mercy of circumstance. Storms, ice conditions, prevailing winds, or changes in the abundance or movements of animals could result in failed hunts. In times of want, Inuit turned to the stores for credit to sustain themselves and their families. The Moravians' response to credit requests was the same as that of other business enterprises: they would issue advances on account and collect against those debts when Inuit next had produce to trade. The balance at the end of the exchange most often left Inuit in need of new credit, a cycle that was not easily broken and could lead to a perpetual state of indebtedness. This situation was the cause of continuous friction between Inuit and the Moravian brethren managing the stores. The problem was discussed as early as 1802 when the Labrador missionaries turned to the SFG for advice.

The Esquimaux have sometimes suffered so much from want of provisions that they are obliged to run into debt at the stores so as not to be able to discharge their arrears in a year or two. This seems a great hardship, especially if their debts originated in real want and were not contracted by habits of idleness. . . . Hitherto the Brethren have helped them with dried fish, pease, flour etc. It made them debtors for it but it sometimes happens that the Brethren having the care of the stores, got into a disagreeable dispute with the poor people when they brought their blubber and skins to barter for necessary things and were reminded first to pay their debts.¹¹

The missionaries, seeking to avoid unpleasant confrontations that would compromise their relationship with Inuit, wanted to know if debt accrued under real hardship might be forgiven. The SFG, trying to balance Christian instincts with sound business principles, was concerned that Inuit might perceive the store as a perpetual means of support. In this particular case, it authorized missionaries to forgive a portion of the debt but asked that every possible means be applied "to promote diligence and suppress idleness among them and to give no encouragement to hope that distress occasioned by them would be relieved by their teachers."¹²

Inuit in the south of the Moravian territory, around Hopedale and Nain, found alternatives to the Moravian trade monopoly as southern traders pushed northward in the early nineteenth century. Independent traders did not carry the heavy overhead of the SFG and in many cases could afford to offer better prices for Inuit produce and cheaper European products. The traders often provided Inuit with the opportunity of obtaining full value for their produce without the discount of debt and many took advantage of the situation. The Moravians viewed the southern traders as a threat to both their religious objectives and commercial interests.¹³ They blamed the traders for undermining Inuit confidence in the mission by spreading rumours about the Moravians'

motives and they chastised Inuit for trading with them, especially if they had outstanding debts at the stores.¹⁴ For the Moravians this was perceived as disloyal and immoral behaviour. Their response was to restrict the credit given to delinquent clients in order to make them aware of their responsibilities. The SFG told the Labrador missionaries that with regard to outstanding debt, discipline must be imposed:

... even at the expense of feelings and the risk of some temporary loss of mutual confidence and understanding. They must be shown the necessity of "proving their faith by their works," and if need be, by the occasional exercise of church discipline against those who disregard the principle.¹⁵

The use of spiritual sanctions for temporal transgressions was a startling and unique weapon to employ in the management of trade, and it possibly alienated as many people as it disciplined. The dual role of the missionary as religious teacher and trader must have been deeply confusing and frustrating to Inuit. It was one thing to believe that the missionaries had Inuit interest at heart when discussing matters of the soul, quite another when they were on opposite sides of the counter, haggling over the price of fish or fur. When it came to trade matters, however, Inuit would continue to act in their own interest, even when it meant the disapproval of the missionaries.

The problem of Inuit debt became a greater concern for the SFG in the mid-nineteenth century. Not only were independent traders penetrating traditional Moravian territory and siphoning off valuable Inuit trade, but changing environmental conditions began to impede Inuit harvesting efforts, causing serious reduction in catches of seals and resulting in smaller shipments to the London markets. This resulted in increasing poverty among Inuit and greater demands for credit at the stores.¹⁶ This was particularly true in the 1850s as wind and ice conditions led to a scarcity of game all along the coast, causing widespread hunger and hardship in all the Moravian communities.¹⁷ The

missionaries did what they could to alleviate the suffering, often depleting their own reserves to help people survive. As it became increasingly difficult for Inuit to make a living or pay off their debts at the store, the missionaries noted that many Inuit were becoming disillusioned and discontented.

This has been the case with not a few of the Esquimaux here at Nain. Murmuring against God for not having done any good for them, their dissatisfaction extends itself to us.¹⁸

That dissatisfaction led increasingly to overt acts of protest. In Hopedale, in 1856, a man accused of stealing from the store shot at the missionary who had accused him of the theft.¹⁹ Two years later, in the same community, a woman, also accused of stealing, set fire to a woodpile behind the mission residence, nearly burning down the Hopedale mission buildings.²⁰ The relationship between Inuit and the missionaries was being tested. The missionary at Hopedale observed:

The spirit of license, of frivolity, and of pride prevails increasingly among them, and it not unfrequently happens that affectionate remonstrances on our part are repaid with insolent behavior. In short, they will take no advice, an evil that may be said more or less to affect the whole nation. Great indifference in spiritual matters, and an increasing want of confidence in us, have made themselves evident. The cause of the latter is unknown to us, but may be sought, perhaps not incorrectly, in the increasing intercourse of our people with the traders in the South.²¹

As the result of the contact with southern traders, Inuit began to question the prices and practices of mission trade and to suspect the Moravians of prospering at Inuit expense. The disillusionment in the Inuit–Moravian relationship also extended to the missionaries. They believed that the root cause of the ill will was the trade and many resented

their involvement in it. The missionaries' purpose in Labrador was to save souls, but in order to pay the overhead of the missionary effort they were also tasked with making a profit on the labour of the people they were there to serve. Many came to believe that the trade compromised the spiritual mission and unnecessarily complicated their relationship with Inuit.²² By trying to serve both God and Mammon, they were wriggling on the pin of a dilemma that many wished to be clear of.

In 1861, in response to rising tensions between Inuit and missionaries over trade matters, Br. Levin Reichel was sent to Labrador to study the problem and recommend solutions. He suggested modifying the trade system and creating a greater separation of missionary and trading functions by creating a separate trade entity with its own supervisor and dedicated staff whose sole purpose would be to manage the stores and conduct commercial affairs. This would enable the missionaries to focus exclusively on spiritual matters without the complicating entanglements associated with the trade. It was hoped that this new structure would clarify matters for both missionary and Inuit.²³

Reichel attempted to improve the welfare of Inuit by raising prices for fur, increasing Inuit share of seals caught in mission nets, encouraging and facilitating Inuit acquisition of nets and traps, and being more liberal in providing credit for items essential for a livelihood such as guns and ammunition.²⁴ These policies may have helped ease the strain temporarily but environmental conditions conspired against any permanent improvement in the temporal welfare of Inuit. The continuing struggles to obtain a livelihood contributed to a renewal of unrest in a number of settlements. The store policy was again at the heart of the discontent.

As usual, outward trials affected the temper and disposition of the Eskimos and although the Lord graciously prevented anything like a general opposition or organized disaffection it was very evident that the deeply rooted distrust of the Kablunak or European was again stirred and ready to find vent in unreasonable complaints and angry

charges without the least foundation. . . . In order to give an opportunity for staging their grievances, a meeting of the men was held, which was marked by some incidents truly Eskimo. Questions were answered, explanations given, and good resulted; but tempers were put to a very severe trial.²⁵

The missionaries were often impatient with Inuit complaints. They commonly characterized "the spirit of discontent" as "sinfulness" with "deplorable consequences"²⁶ and dismissed protests as acts of disobedience. They attributed Inuit hostility towards the mission to ignorance or misunderstanding.

Trading, to be successful in its moral aim, demands the enforcement of strict regulations, especially with regard to the careless contracting of debts. But where a missionary, as such, is obliged to act strictly, his mode of dealing easily appears, at least in the eyes of the Eskimos, incompatible with Christian love and pity.²⁷

Inuit were expected to be compliant and to trust that their teachers had their best interests at heart.

And yet the intractable conflict between spiritual and commercial affairs continued to cause soul-searching among some of the missionaries. Carl Linder, who had been appointed trade supervisor after Reichel's visit and who served in that capacity for 10 years, despaired of ever reconciling the two branches of the mission and, at a particularly dark moment, considered resigning because he thought the trade might be corrupting the mission's spiritual objectives by undermining its relationship with the people the mission had come to serve. His letter to the SFG in London, questioning the benefit of the trade, shocked his superiors and led to a further re-examination of trade policy and practice.

I despair entirely of the trade: it is too much for us, because we have not the men for it. We shall be more of a trading

society than a mission society. . . . Firstly, the people keep away from us, they distrust us, they want to be free and consider us to be in their way by making money on their poverty for our own benefit. With these views, I cannot look at my calling as missionary service but as one who does more harm than good to the mission and I must desire to be freed from such position.²⁸

The problem for the Moravians and Inuit alike was that, commercially, they needed each other. The Moravians had no other means of fully financing their mission and except for a few months in the summer, Inuit, particularly those north of Nain, had few alternatives for the sale of their produce or the acquisition of supplies.²⁹ However, this mutual dependence did nothing to dispel the suspicion and mistrust undermining their relationship.

By the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Moravians had expanded their missionary efforts, building new stations at Zoar (1865) and Ramah (1871) in an effort to extend their evangelical reach, but at the same time they increased the mission's overhead. The SFG became preoccupied with managing expenses, and in 1876 Reichel returned to Labrador to find better ways of getting costs under control. Finding ways to reduce Inuit store debt was his first order of business.³⁰ The following year, the SFG devised a set of store rules and regulations that it ordered to be posted in all its stores in Labrador. It hoped that these rules would explain and clarify the basis on which the SFG conducted its operations so that expectations could be managed and misunderstandings avoided. The reforms were supposed to resolve outstanding trade issues, but in fact these moves only aggravated them. The frustration with the Moravians' store service, which had simmered for years, would boil over in the late 1880s in a series of incidents at Hopedale, Zoar, and Hebron.

Hopedale

In 1885, Br. Louis Kaestner was appointed store manager at Hopedale. Fearing that he would impose a stricter compliance of the store rules relating to credit and debt, Inuit began "an agitation against him." As a gesture of conciliation, Kaestner promised to maintain the status quo for a year, but as the end of the year approached the agitation was renewed. At a heated men's meeting, "the Eskimoes declared . . . that they did not believe that the rules emanated from the authorities at home" and "threatened to take their trade elsewhere."³¹ The Hopedale missionaries, discouraged by the episode, wrote to the SFG in London, as well as to their own superintendent at Nain, Br. Theodor Bourquin, recommending that the store at Hopedale be shut down, at least temporarily, in order to teach Inuit a lesson.³² Br. Bourquin subsequently wrote to the SFG. He did not support the Hopedale missionaries in their request to close the store, noting that such an action could lead to a dispersal of the people from Hopedale and create a state of alienation and bitterness even among those who were loyal to the mission.³³ However, he recognized the ongoing difficulties when it came to the trade and suggested it might be time for the SFG to send another delegate to clarify store policies, and in particular to explain to Inuit that the missionaries were not responsible for trade policy and regulations. The purpose of such a visit would be "simply to tell the people everywhere, in love, briefly and conclusively that the store rules . . . are really your wish." He went on to suggest that the people at each station be asked to accept the rules and that where they did not "consideration be given to closing the stores at those places."³⁴ The SFG was reluctant to close any stores but agreed to Bourquin's request for a representative to visit Labrador. Br. Benjamin LaTrobe was selected for the task. He was to visit each mission station, assess the issues, solicit the advice of missionaries, and meet with Inuit. The new trade rules were the means by which the SFG had hoped to re-establish sound fiscal management³⁵ and LaTrobe was to explain to Inuit "that they express our wishes and the conditions on which we are willing and able to trade." As a gesture of good will, the SFG empowered

LaTrobe to grant a 25 per cent amnesty on outstanding debts if paid off within the year.³⁶ But as LaTrobe was preparing to leave London, a fresh crisis developed, this time at Zoar.

Zoar

Zoar had been established at Tappangayok, between Hopedale and Nain, in 1865, allegedly to serve the spiritual needs of both Inuit and settlers in the region, but its true purpose appears to have been more material than spiritual. Br. Auguste Freitag, the missionary at Nain, who initially proposed the idea, admitted that the new station would serve “no missionary objective in the ordinary sense of the term.”³⁷ Indeed, most Labrador missionaries had opposed its foundation, pointing out that there were no “heathen” Esquimaux in the district and that the people living in the area were already members of the Nain or Hopedale congregations. The real objective was “chiefly for the purpose of keeping off southern traders” who were siphoning off Inuit trade.³⁸ The Moravians were particularly concerned with the trading operations of Hunt and Henley, which had establishments at Ukkusiksalik (Davis Inlet), north of Hopedale, and at Paul’s Island, just south of Nain. Both of these trading posts were bought by the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1869.³⁹

Zoar was to have a short and troubled history. It was a poor place for hunting and fishing and the people who moved there struggled to make a living. A review of Moravian mission records for Zoar between 1869 and 1888 indicates poor harvests of seals, codfish, and caribou in all but six of those years.⁴⁰ The results were frequent economic hardship, increasing dependence on the stores, and rising debts, all of which led to grumblings from both sides of the ledger. When the SFG introduced its new Store Rules and Regulations in 1877, the people of Zoar were openly hostile.

The result of the rules promulgated last year with reference to the demoralizing credit system . . . was that a few set to

work with energy and cleared off the balance against them. Others have taken no trouble in this direction. A large number, although deeply indebted here, took their produce elsewhere thereby depriving themselves of the right to procure any article on credit at the store. In accordance with the rule to this effect, of which they had a few weeks previously publicly declared their approval . . . ammunition and provisions on credit were refused to those who had transgressed. Instantly the spirit of discontent broke out, very unbecoming speeches were heard and men's meetings were held, at which strong words were used with little consideration. . . . About seven families have openly separated from the store without paying their debts, others take their produce secretly to the traders.⁴¹

The Moravians acknowledged the difficulties created by poor harvests but also questioned Inuit diligence, industry, and honesty. They were particularly critical of the practice of taking produce to other traders instead of paying down debt.⁴² Inuit felt little compulsion to trade at the mission store. Hunt and Henley and later the Hudson's Bay Company were nearby, and in the summertime numerous Newfoundland traders and fishermen provided further outlets for their produce. Disputes over prices, credit, and debt eroded the trust between the missionaries and Inuit at Zoar. A few prosperous years in the early 1880s calmed the waters temporarily but subsequent years of poor harvests led to a renewal of trouble.⁴³

The situation at Zoar came to a head in 1887–88. Accounts at the store were normally balanced at the end of the cod fishery, signalled by the departure of the mission's collector boat, the *Gleaner*. That year, not one person among the 26 with accounts at Zoar paid his debt and four men, despite debt owing, chose to leave the community to establish trading relations with the Hudson's Bay Company at Ukkusiksalik.⁴⁴ Hunting that fall and winter was a complete failure, leading to an increased demand for credit, which the mission store refused to grant. By the new year many people were becoming desperate and at a men's

meeting held in January a decision was taken to help themselves to store supplies the next trading day if the storekeeper again refused demands for assistance. The missionaries, however, learned of the plan in advance and confronted the men during a church service.

On January 7, the men planned to plunder the store, the very chapel servants being at the head of the conspiracy. Happily it was revealed to our missionaries by a settler and so [was] frustrated by Br. Rinderknecht's warning them at the evening service, January 5, by no means to burden their consciences with such sin. After this meeting the men stormed into the mission house demanding to know who had betrayed their secret. Happily they appealed to Br. Bourquin [the superintendent at Nain] and the missionaries were well content that they should fetch him. His visit quieted the spirit of unrest for the time but there were only too many evidences that the moral tone was unchanged. On Whitmonday, the frequent impudent demands at the store culminated in three shots fired into the window at the part where our two missionaries were busy. They were unhurt and at that time unconscious of their danger. The culprit was Caleb and his motive was the expression of revenge for having to leave the store without getting his unreasonable demands. Banished from the station he is now wandering about like Cain.⁴⁵

Bourquin's response to the unrest at Zoar was to close down the store.⁴⁶ In his report to the SFG, he made it clear that the latest incidents at Zoar were not isolated occurrences but only the latest manifestations of unrest that had been an ongoing feature of the community for many years. He saw no possibility of improvement. The problem, he said, stemmed in part from the poor location of Zoar for hunting and fishing, resulting in a heavy dependence of the people on the mission for relief, but he also claimed the situation was exacerbated by poor leadership in the community and by the poor character of the

people, who lacked both the energy and will to work off their debts. "[This] occurs elsewhere . . . and is known to all store brethren, but in Zoar it is inherent in the people."⁴⁷ The result was the highest per capita debt of any Moravian community on the coast and the greatest single expenditure of poor relief. Bourquin believed there was no prospect of debts being paid and that there was only one way to ensure that the existing liabilities did not continue to increase.

Can we go on like this? The answer, as sad as it is, is no. Something decisive must happen and this cannot happen in any other way than by abolishing the trade and store in Zoar.⁴⁸

The SFG's emissary, Benjamin LaTrobe, arrived in Labrador the following summer and it was left to him to make the announcement to the people of Zoar that the store would be closing. He delivered a sober and stern lecture:

This is your own fault and we are very sorry that you have been so foolish and shortsighted. But it would not be right to you or to ourselves to let you go on using our money and our goods instead of your own. . . . You have been living on debts. No man in all the world can do that for long. Every man must pay his debts, if not, they must lie as a weight upon his heart and conscience. It is the same with you. Whether you trade with us at Nain or Hopedale or elsewhere, you have the responsibility of your debts. . . . Fish diligently, very diligently, so as to have enough during the winter both for a livelihood and for ammunition. Remember there will be no store here after the "Gleaner" has left. So be diligent and honest and ask God to forgive your sins and help you.⁴⁹

LaTrobe began his tour of mission stations along the coast, consulting with the missionaries on trade matters and holding public

meetings at each of the communities to restate his principal message, that the store rules and regulations were the will of the SFG and the only basis under which the SFG was able and willing to carry on the trade. The implied threat, underscored by the decision taken at Zoar, was that if Inuit did not assent, the SFG would close the store in their communities just as it had done at Zoar. At all the stations he visited, LaTrobe reported that Inuit accepted the SFG's terms for trade and promised to abide by the rules. But as he stated, the compliance was less than enthusiastic: "The Eskimoes have for the most part yielded, somewhat ungraciously, to the inevitable."⁵⁰

The closure of the store at Zoar in 1888 led to the departure of the people from the community. Some migrated to Nain, some to Hopedale, while still others remained in the area trading at the Hudson's Bay Company post at Ukkusiksalik (Davis Inlet). The Moravians blamed the people for the failure of the community.

These people have learned no wisdom or thrift in spite of all the love and patience shown them and they have made the last winter a trying time for their devoted missionaries.⁵¹

A final decision to end the Zoar mission was taken in 1894.

While LaTrobe was in Labrador, Bourquin asked Br. Kaestner to draft revisions of the store rules. This he did. The new rules were presented to the Labrador missionaries at their annual conference and were endorsed by them unanimously. At the same meeting, the missionaries objected to the SFG's offer of an amnesty of 25 per cent of Inuit trade debt, arguing that "the Eskimoes would say to them, 'See it is as we thought; your superiors are more merciful than you.'"⁵² LaTrobe, believing the Labrador missionaries were better positioned to assess the effect of such a policy, deferred to their opinion and withdrew the proposal.

Hebron

The SFG was pleased with LaTrobe's visit. It appeared that the trade had been re-established on a rational basis under clear guidelines and with the renewed support of missionaries and Inuit, both of whom had previously been dissatisfied with the trade system. But if the SFG and the Labrador missionaries hoped that LaTrobe's visit had put an end to Inuit unrest, they would soon discover that they were mistaken.

Br. Bourquin, the superintendent of the Labrador mission, reported to the SFG shortly after LaTrobe's visit that the trip had strengthened the hand of the store brethren and was showing positive results at all stations, with the possible exception of Hebron "where the massive debt is very serious."⁵³ LaTrobe had also expressed concern over the situation at Hebron, where "the successive years of hunting and fishing have impoverished the Hebron people and swelled the debt list."⁵⁴ The SFG also heard directly from Inuit at Hebron. It had received a letter from Amandus, a former chapel servant, questioning the price of kerosene charged by the mission store.

We have noticed that for some years our oil is getting cheaper and cheaper and we are told that it is because other oils are in the market. But we do not find that you sell us kerosene oil any cheaper, how is this?⁵⁵

The matter was referred to one of the SFG's committee members for further investigation.

Hebron Inuit took matters into their own hands on 29 September 1889. After church services at one o'clock in the afternoon, one of the Moravian missionaries, Brother Carl Friedrich Kahle, was approached by a delegation of three men, the two "native helpers" Thomas and Johannes, and a third man, Amandus.⁵⁶ They were seeking a meeting with the store brother, Adolphus Hlavatschek, but wanted the other missionaries, Kahle and Auguste Wirth, to attend. Despite misgivings, the missionaries agreed to meet in the school room, which was attached

to the church and the missionaries' residence. There, they were joined by most of the Hebron men. Br. Kahle began by asking whether one or all of them had specific concerns and was told: "All of us!" Nathan was the first to speak and asked why unmarried men were no longer to be granted credit. Hlavatschek replied that it was one of the new store rules and that they had been told of it during LaTrobe's visit. These rules, he reiterated, were set by London, and were the condition of trade. This statement, according to the missionaries, was met with anger and the meeting quickly erupted into a litany of accusations. "We stood all alone," they later wrote, "not one man stuck with us, and not one word in support or to calm tempers was heard." The door was barred and they were "held captive in our house for four hours" subject to all kinds of "insolence, coarseness and meanness." The discussion ran the gamut of trade issues: such things as the prices offered for produce, the method of weighing trout, the wages paid for labour, and the cost of kerosene. The response of the missionaries gave no satisfaction. They reminded the men that they had agreed to abide by the store rules and pointed out that if they had "we would not be here now." They were simply pouring fuel on the fire.

The main speakers paced up and down like angry bulls in their pent-up cages, to occasionally show us their clenched fist, as they leveled in our faces one accusation or another amid the applause of all those in attendance . . . it was as though we stood before a mad court of the inquisition.⁵⁷

The missionaries characterized the meeting as an "uprising." Kahle was told his heart had hardened into a rock, Wirth that he was without mercy, and Hlavatschek that he must be rich enough by now to return home and that it would be best if he did so. The Hebron men claimed that they had written the SFG about many of the issues they were raising but had received no reply. It was said that LaTrobe and those in London were "merciless in their treatment of Eskimos," that they were "liars and defrauders," and that LaTrobe was "the biggest

liar and defrauder in the world!" The men claimed that they were being overcharged for products in the store, that they had been told that prices were far cheaper in St. John's, and that they were being cheated and deceived. The missionaries attributed Inuit dissatisfaction to the "untutored and distrustful hearts of people" who were easily misled.

At the end of the meeting, Thomas declared that if the missionaries could not help them, then they would no longer help the missionaries. From that point forward, he declared, they would withdraw all services such as cutting wood, fetching water, sewing boots, or carrying mail and that this withdrawal of services would include the work of the women in the mission kitchen, the girls tending the missionaries' children, and the helpers in the store. Then, on a sign from Thomas, the door was made free and the men led the way through the missionaries' house, taking with them the kitchen staff and the children's maid.

For three days "the disgraceful spirit of rebellion" was sustained. The missionaries attempted to go about their business as usual, working in their garden to bring in the autumn harvest or fetching water, but wherever they went they were "yelled at and mocked." Then, on the third day, Thomas led a peace delegation to the steps of the mission house. The missionaries accepted the overture but treated it more as an act of surrender than a desire for reconciliation. They considered the rebellion to be an act of sin, fixed firmly on the "wrongdoing" and "disobedience" of the people, and looked for signs of contrition, a "recognition of trespasses and repentance." At no time in their lengthy report on the incident did the Hebron missionaries suggest that there may have been any merit to Inuit complaints. They focused instead on punishing the offenders. Both Thomas and Johannes were dismissed as "native helpers," and an upcoming communal feast was cancelled along with choir singing and music, "as all but two [of the choir] had been among the worst in the turmoil."⁵⁸

Thomas accepted his dismissal. He admitted to being the instigator of the meeting but reported that dissatisfaction towards the store had been prevalent throughout the community for over a year and claimed there were those who had wanted to make a more forceful

demonstration against the store and that his actions had perhaps prevented a greater misfortune from happening. Johannes, the other “native helper” to be dismissed, appears to have been unrepentant. According to the Moravians’ account he “did not appear to understand in his heart his wrongdoing. In his eyes we continue to be the guilty party. Fourteen days having passed and he has not attended church.”⁵⁹ As for Amandus, the third man of the original delegation, he appeared to be simply bewildered by the Moravians’ response to the affair:

Amandus, who is regarded as among the most enlightened, came to us and spoke of his remorse that he had participated in the uproar. He belongs to the people of the choir and he immediately spoke about the cancellation of the communal feast and that the choir had been suspended. He said: we have erred greatly, but we have sinned because of the store, not on account of the church, that we are now punished by the church, we do not understand.⁶⁰

It was a fair point. The Moravians were using church discipline to punish a protest against store practices. Br. Wirth, in frank discussions with the SFG in London the following year, called it “spiritual weapons for temporal offences.”⁶¹ But if the missionaries expected repentance and submission to their authority they were to be disappointed. They suspected that declarations of remorse had a more practical purpose. “We sense that improved heartfelt attitudes have to a lesser extent determined their yielding than needs, in terms of the store, without which they cannot live.”⁶²

Three months later, at Christmas, people asked for the reinstatement of choral singing and suggested that not to do so signalled unforgiveness. The Moravians bristled at the suggestion that they were somehow to blame for the situation in the community, but fearing more trouble, they yielded to the request. There was residual bitterness on both sides. In the concluding statement of their report to the SFG in London, the Hebron missionaries reported on the prevailing

atmosphere in the community after the "uprising." "There is peace," they wrote, "but it is a foul peace."⁶³

London

The response of the SFG in London to the Hebron disturbance was far more self-critical than that of the Hebron missionaries. Although they considered the incident "deplorable," they also sought explanations and found that some of their own practices and policies had been contributing factors. They examined the unaddressed issue raised by Amandus, the price of kerosene charged in its stores, and discovered that it was sold at a profit "far exceeding the 150% (of cost) on articles laid down in the 1888 revision of the tariff."⁶⁴ On further examination, the SFG acknowledged that the discontent was in part traceable to the revised trade rules of 1888, developed in Labrador during LaTrobe's visit, which "raised selling prices from 125% to 150% profit simultaneously with the reduction of prices paid for native products."⁶⁵ The draft of the new tariff had been developed by Br. Kaestner, the storekeeper at Hopedale, at Br. Bourquin's request, partly in response to letters from the SFG expressing concern over continued losses at the stores. The draft was then presented to LaTrobe and tabled at the general Labrador Conference, where it was endorsed unanimously by the local missionaries. The SFG realized that these revisions contributed to the unrest, but partially absolved itself of responsibility by stating that although it had failed to "perceive the gravity of these revisions," the Labrador missionaries had "exceeded its wishes."⁶⁶

The SFG sought to make amends in order to "relieve the strained relations of the native to our store brethren and remove the grounds of discontent on the part of the Eskimoes." It enacted a number of reforms, beginning with a return to the earlier tariff rate of 125 per cent. The SFG also resolved to pay, when known, the equivalent prices paid for Inuit produce by the Hudson's Bay Company, to increase the wages paid for labour, and to revise the share structure with Inuit who used store nets for sealing. Instead of a share of two-thirds to the store and

one-third to Inuit, it was to be reversed. Finally, in a gesture of reconciliation and perhaps compensation for its own role in the store disputes, the SFG offered to gift its regular clients a special credit of £5. This would ease the debt burden of each individual struggling to balance his account at the mission store. Applied to the accounts of all 240 store clients, this would mean a write-down of £1200 on the total Labrador debt.⁶⁷ It was a gift that was never received. Br. Bourquin recommended against its implementation, suggesting that it would “tend to encourage and confirm the Eskimoes in their self-righteous and seditious spirit, by leading them to think that rebellion is the best means of extorting the concession of their unreasonable demands.”⁶⁸ In deference to Bourquin’s opinion, the SFG withdrew the offer. The missionaries also opposed the redistribution of the share structure for catches in mission sealing nets, declaring that the mission’s share was principally used for poor relief and thus a change would do greater harm than good.⁶⁹ Once again the SFG deferred to the Labrador missionaries and withdrew its proposal.

Despite the SFG’s acknowledgement of some responsibility for Inuit unrest, the Labrador missionaries appeared unshaken in their view that they, not Inuit, were the victims of these incidents. As the editor of the Moravian publication *Periodical Accounts* wrote:

Sorely at times do they [the missionaries] need all the comfort and strength that faith can draw from the Divine supplies. They labour in spiritual things among the people who have an unamiable side to their character, and sometimes, as especially at Zoar in 1888 and at Hebron last winter, they reward their best friends with ingratitude.⁷⁰

Conclusion

The incidents at Hopedale, Zoar, and Hebron exposed the tensions at the heart of the relationship between Labrador Inuit and the Moravians in the late nineteenth century. In a time of resource depletion,

Inuit hunters and fishermen were finding it increasingly difficult to secure an adequate livelihood. This meant a greater dependency on the stores and a greater demand for credit, which the Moravians were increasingly reluctant to provide. Contact with non-Moravian traders, such as the Hudson's Bay Company and Newfoundland fish merchants, provided alternative markets for their produce, and Inuit, where possible, began to exploit these opportunities to their advantage. Through contact with outside traders, they were able to compare prices offered for their produce as well as prices demanded for imported merchandise; as a result, they began to question the fairness of the policy and practices of the Moravians' trade system. Although they were told again and again that the Moravians had their best interests at heart, many began to suspect that the Moravians were the real beneficiaries of the trade.

The Moravians, for their part, were having their own economic difficulties. Costs of supporting the mission were increasing as income from the trade was falling, the consequence of less produce, lower market prices, and greater competition. The SFG identified Inuit debt as a pressing problem that had to be managed more effectively if overall costs were to be controlled. As a result, credit was being tightened just when it was needed most. At the same time, the Moravians were losing trust in their Inuit clients. Many of them believed that Inuit economic difficulties were of their own making; that laziness, lack of diligence, and dishonesty were the root cause of their economic problems. They were quick to dismiss Inuit grievances as disobedience, misunderstanding, and ingratitude. And yet, as the rebellion in Hebron illustrates, the Moravians were capable of making mistakes that could exacerbate Inuit hardship. There were those in the mission willing to recognize that Inuit grievances could be justified and others who simply viewed them as sin.

The conundrum of balancing the needs of the spiritual and commercial missions would remain a source of debate and discomfort for Labrador missionaries for decades to come. In April 1890, a short time after the "uprising" in Hebron, the Labrador missionaries from all

along the coast met for their annual conference at Nain and discussed the relation of the mission to the trade. They concluded that changes had to be made and proposed that the mission get out of the business altogether by finding a Christian company willing to undertake the trade or else completely separate the two branches of the mission “tangibly to the Esquimaux,” by such measures as separating the stores from the church buildings and hiring distinctively different nationalities for the two services. The SFG rejected both proposals as impractical. It knew of no commercial entity that would truly care for Inuit welfare and knew of no other means of paying the costs of mission work.⁷¹

As the records of the Moravian mission indicate, a contentious relationship developed between Inuit and the missionaries in the late nineteenth century in matters pertaining to the trade. Although Inuit may have been willing to submit to Moravian authority in matters of religion, they were far less willing to accept Moravian dictates in economic matters affecting their livelihood and survival. Over time they began to question the notion that the purpose of Moravian trade was to benefit Inuit and increasingly suspected that the Moravians were the true beneficiaries of the trade. As this idea took hold, Inuit began to challenge Moravian trade policies and practices by promoting and defending their own interests more aggressively. Instead of passive acceptance, they sought their own solutions to problems, either by seeking alternative outlets for their goods, where possible, and withdrawing from the Moravians’ trading system or by engaging in collective action against the missionaries when faced with perceived injustices. The Moravians, for their part, continued to struggle with the contradictions and complications associated with being both missionaries and traders and would never fully resolve the dilemma until the SFG finally transferred its trading interests to the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1927.

Acknowledgements

This paper was originally written as part of my Master’s thesis, “Labrador Inuit and the World’s Columbian Exposition, 1893,” submitted

to the Department of History at MUN. I would like to thank my supervisor, Kurt Korneski, for his continuous support and advice throughout the writing of the thesis. I would also like to acknowledge a number of scholars on whose work I have relied in order to write this paper, particularly Carol Brice-Bennett, James K. Hiller, and Susan A. Kaplan. In addition, I also thank the anonymous referees who reviewed this paper as well as Barry Gaulton and the editorial staff of *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*.

Notes

- 1 *Periodical Accounts* relating to the Missions of the Church of the United Brethren, established among the Heathen (PA), Zoar Diary, July 1877, vol. 30, 332.
- 2 J.K.Hiller, "The Foundations and the Early Years of the Moravian Mission in Labrador, 1752–1805" (Master's thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland 1967).
- 3 The reasons for Inuit conversion receive a thorough discussion in Carol Brice-Bennett, "Two Opinions: Inuit and Moravian Missionaries in Labrador 1804–1860" (Master's thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1981).
- 4 *Periodical Accounts*, Series 2, Vol.1, no. 4 (Dec. 1890): 183–84.
- 5 Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel Among the Heathen (SFG), Letter to Newfoundland Government, 2 Sept. 1892, para. 1014, Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN), Centre for Newfoundland Studies (CNS), Moravian Mission Microfilm 513, Reel 6.
- 6 Hiller, "The Foundations and the Early Years of the Moravian Mission in Labrador," 112–25.
- 7 Susan Kaplan, "Economic and Social Change in Neo-Eskimo Culture (PhD thesis, Bryn Mawr College, 1983), 171.
- 8 HBC, letter from William Smith, Secretary of HBC, to D.R. Stewart, 21 Jan. 1837; HBC, letter from George Simpson to James Keith, 21 Jan. 1837, RPA, P.T. McGrath Fonds, MG 8.86.
- 9 John Kennedy, *Encounters, An Anthropological History of Southeastern Labrador* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 73.

- 10 Carol Brice-Bennett, "The Northlanders: A History of Population, Socio-economic Relations and Cultural Change of Inuit Occupying the Remote Northern Coast of Labrador," unpublished manuscript (Labrador Inuit Association, 1996).
- 11 Minutes of the SFG, 28 Oct. 1802, 364–67, MUN, CNS, Moravian Mission Microfilm 513, Reel 1.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 *Periodical Accounts*, Extract of private correspondence of Adam Kunath, missionary at Hopedale, 1831, Vol. 12, 67.
- 14 Brice-Bennett, "Two Opinions," 313.
- 15 Minutes of the SFG, 12 Apr. 1847, MUN, CNS, Moravian Mission Microfilm 513, Reel 2, Section III, Trade, unpaginated.
- 16 Brice-Bennett, "Two Opinions," 452–65.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 *Periodical Accounts*, extract of private correspondence of A. Freitag, Vol. 22, 165.
- 19 Ibid., letter from Hopedale to the SFG, 10 Aug. 1856, Vol. 22, 103.
- 20 Ibid., letter from Hopedale to the SFG, 12 July 1858, Vol. 23, 50.
- 21 Ibid., letter from Hopedale to the SFG, 30 July 1857, Vol. 22, 317.
- 22 Minutes of the SFG, 8 Oct. 1874, para. 237, MUN, CNS, Moravian Mission Microfilm 513, Reel 3.
- 23 *Periodical Accounts*, "Retrospect of the History of the Mission of the Brethren's Church in Labrador for the Past Hundred Years," Vol. 28, 68.
- 24 Brice-Bennett, "Two Opinions," 496.
- 25 *Periodical Accounts*, Nain Diary, July 1880, Vol. 31, 343.
- 26 Ibid., Zoar Diary, July 1877, Vol. 30, 332.
- 27 Ibid., Dec. 1888, Vol. 34, 379.
- 28 Minutes of the SFG, 8 Oct. 1874, para. 237, MUN, CNS, Moravian Mission Microfilm 513, Reel 3.
- 29 There were few independent traders north of Nain at this time. The Hudson's Bay Company established a post in Saeglek in 1867 principally to intercept the trading missions of northern Inuit travelling to Hebron. The post closed a few years later, in 1874. The HBC established a post further north in Nachvak in 1868. Similarly, this post was aimed at Inuit trade beyond the Moravian communities.
- 30 *Periodical Accounts*, Dec. 1876, Vol. 30, 93.

- 31 Minutes of the SFG, 8 Oct. 1886, para. 726, MUN, CNS, Microfilm 513, Reel 3.
- 32 Minutes of the SFG, 7 Jan. 1887, MUN, CNS, Microfilm 513, Reel 3, para. 741.
- 33 Report of Theodor Bourquin to SFG, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Moravian Brethren Fonds, Microfilm Reel M 492, 10856–57, para. 35; translation courtesy of Delf Hohmann.
- 34 Minutes of the SFG, 2 Dec. 1887, para. 777, MUN, CNS, Moravian Mission Microfilm 513, Reel 3.
- 35 Minutes of the SFG, 7 Dec. 1888, para. 814, MUN, CNS, Moravian Microfilm 513, Reel 3: "The list of debts owing to SFG at the various stations in Labrador shows a total of £2588, far too large for all concerned."
- 36 Minutes of the SFG, 8 June 1888, para. 804, MUN, CNS, Moravian Mission Microfilm 513, Reel 3.
- 37 Minutes of the SFG, 17 Dec. 1862, para. 296, MUN, CNS, Moravian Mission Microfilm 51, Reel 3.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Kennedy, *Encounters*, 73.
- 40 *Periodical Accounts*, Vol. 27–34. One is able to determine that the following years had poor harvests: 1870–74, 1876, 1878, 1879, 1880, 1884, 1885, 1886, 1887, and 1888; those years with relatively good results were 1869, 1875, 1877, 1881, 1882, and 1883.
- 41 Ibid., Zoar Diary, July 1877, Vol. 30, 332.
- 42 Ibid., July 1876, Vol. 30, 97.
- 43 Ibid., 1882, Vol. 32, 582.
- 44 Report of Theodor Bourquin to SFG, LAC, Microfilm Reel M 492, 10856–57, para. 36.
- 45 Report of Visitation in Labrador by Br. B. LaTrobe in 1888, MUN, CNS, Moravian Mission Microfilm 690, Vol. 7, R.15.K.a.11.g, 39.
- 46 Bourquin Report, para. 38.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid., para. 36.
- 49 LaTrobe Report, 32–33.
- 50 Ibid. 40.
- 51 *Periodical Accounts*, Series 2, Dec 1890, 185.

- 52 LaTrobe Report, 39.
- 53 Minutes of the SFG, 30 Aug. 1889, para. 854, MUN, CNS, Moravian Mission Microfilm 513, Reel 3.
- 54 LaTrobe Report, 13.
- 55 Minutes of the SFG, 8 Mar. 1889, para. 832, MUN, CNS, Moravian Mission Microfilm 513, Reel 3.
- 56 Events relating to the Hebron “uprising” are described in detail in “Letter Concerning the Unrest at Hebron on September 29 1889,” MUN, CNS, Moravian Mission Microfilm Reel M510, 041163–041181, translation by Larrass Translations, Ottawa.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Minutes of the SFG, 31 Oct. 1890, para. 915, MUN, CNS, Moravian Mission Microfilm 513, Reel 3.
- 62 Letter Concerning the Unrest at Hebron on 29 Sept. 1889.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Minutes of the SFG, 22 Aug. 1890, para. 909, MUN, CNS, Moravian Mission Microfilm 513, Reel 3.
- 65 Ibid., 6 Feb. 1891, para. 927.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 Ibid., 3 Apr. 1891, para. 938.
- 69 Ibid., 1 Apr. 1892, para. 997, and 8 Mar. 1893, para. 1056.
- 70 *Periodical Accounts*, Dec. 1890, Vol. 2:1, 184.
- 71 Minutes of the SFG, 2 Jan. 1891, para. 923, MUN, CNS, Moravian Mission Microfilm 513, Reel 3.

Bibliography

Periodical Accounts relating to the Missions of the Church of the United Brethren, established among the Heathen, London Brethren Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel, Fetter Lane, London, Series 1, 1790–1889, Vols. 12, 22, 23, 27–34, Series 2, 1890–1921, Vol. (BX8565 P4).

- Brethren's Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel (SFG), Minutes of Meetings of the SFG (London), Moravian microfilm series available at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Centre for Newfoundland Studies, and Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.
- Brice-Bennett, Carol. "Two Opinions: Inuit and Moravian Missionaries in Labrador 1804–1860." MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1981.
- . "Missionaries as Traders: Moravians and Labrador Inuit 1771–1860." In *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective*, edited by Rosemary E. Ommer. Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 1990.
- Hiller, J.K. "The Foundations and the Early Years of the Moravian Mission in Labrador, 1752–1805." MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1967.
- . "Early Patrons of the Labrador Eskimos: The Moravian Mission in Labrador 1764–1805." In *Patrons and Brokers in the Eastern Arctic*, edited by Robert Paine. St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1971.
- . "The Moravians in Labrador 1771–1805." *The Polar Record*, 15, no. 99 (1971): 839–54.
- Kaplan, Susan A. "Economic and Social Change in Labrador Neo-Eskimo Culture." PhD thesis, Bryn Mawr College, 1983.
- Kennedy, John C. *Encounters: An Anthropological History of Southeastern Labrador*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2015.
- Markham, Nigel. "Labrador Inuit and the World's Columbian Exposition, 1893." MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2020.