

The Beothucks: Questions and Answers

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an "ordinary superstar". Yet for the most part she brings her abilities as a professional historian into her work. *Pierre-Amand Landry* is well written, based upon solid documentation (although footnote 29, chapter 6 is rather confusing consisting as it does of three question marks), and very effective in portraying both the man and his milieu. One can only hope that her book will soon be republished in English so that it may be available to a larger and increasingly inquisitive audience. Indeed, one would hope that all the books cited in this review become more widely read. For a country trying to determine what it wants to be, they offer valuable insights into what it has been and what it is. Taken together they serve to indicate that Quebec is not entirely correct in dismissing the minority groups as being irrevocably lost to the French culture. If these groups wish to survive, they probably can since it has not been governmental or overt Anglo-Protestant pressure that has caused their denationalization to this point. Rather it has been their own lessening self-consciousness, their own lack of organization and their own economic situation. Quebec could stimulate at least the first two of these factors.

MARTIN S. SPIGELMAN

The Beothucks: Questions and Answers

The original Red Indians were the indigenous people of Newfoundland, and the last of them died in 1829. They have come in for considerable attention of late, mainly because their fate represents Canada's contribution to the sad history of genocide. The long-standing source for most of our knowledge about the natives of Newfoundland is J.P. Howley's *The Beothucks or Red Indians* (Cambridge, 1915), the result of a lifetime of collecting material, written, oral and artifactual. The work was well done: if Howley missed a document, so did everyone else. The book, long out of print, was made available to the general public in the Coles Canadiana Series (Toronto, 1974). In order to meet contemporary tastes, the introduction to the reprint featured a spurious atrocity story fabricated for a *Maclean's Magazine* article of 1959.¹

From the first, the Beothucks have attracted romantic writers. An anonymous author in the *Federal American Monthly* (June, 1844) recorded that they "descend far under ground in winter, and lead a kind of fairy life; that they have power to change themselves into birds and fishes . . ." (p. 524). The writer depicted "Mary May, the Newfoundland Indian", and told her story with a strange admixture of historical fact and creative imagination. This romantic tradition has its current

¹ Harold Horwood, "The People Who Were Murdered for Fun", *Maclean's Magazine*, 10 October 1959.

expression in the writings of Harold Horwood, who believes that the Beothucks' way of life was "related to the culture of the Pacific coast tribes, 4,000 miles away, to the culture of Peru, 5,000 miles away, and to an ancient culture which existed in the valley of the Nile".²

Recent studies have gone beyond both Howley and the romantics in reconstructing the Beothuck past. J.V. Wright's *Six Chapters of Canada's Prehistory* (Ottawa, National Museum of Man, 1976) provides an excellent introduction to the subject of archaeology and what it can tell us about past ways of life through the location, recovery and interpretation of prehistoric artifacts. James A. Tuck puts these techniques to work and presents a tentative synthesis of *Newfoundland and Labrador Prehistory* (Ottawa, National Museum of Man, 1976), based on archaeological research. As Tuck notes, there are difficulties. Since the land supported a hunter-gatherer-fisher people, there are no "convenient markers, such as the introduction of ceramics or agriculture" (p. 8) to permit dividing the past 9,000 years into distinct periods. Nevertheless, Tuck identifies the Maritime Archaic people (-7,500 to -3,500 years) and the palaeo Eskimo (-4,000 to -1,200) as predecessors of the Beothucks. The origin of these latecomers remains a mystery. They might be related to the skraelings or the Algonkians or even be descendants of the Maritime Archaic people. Evidence is hard to come by, for Beothuck burial sites have been looted over the years. Recent excavations at Cape Freels have yielded distinctive artifacts that date from about 200 AD and indicate that a new group, possibly the Beothucks, co-existed at that time with the late palaeo Eskimos. A Beothuck site known to date from the late eighteenth century has provided evidence of their fate in the last years: the seasonal migrations had come to an end, they were dependent year-round on caribou meat, and with their mobility gone, the people could not survive.

Tuck's work is based on research carried out in the past ten years, and this is an important point to remember when considering the seventh reissue of Diamond Jenness, *The Indians of Canada* (Toronto, University of Toronto, 1977). The fact that this book, originally written in 1932, is still kept in print as a basic reference is a comment on the general poverty of scholarship concerning the native people of Canada. Has nothing been added in the past 45 years? If the concentrated misinformation on the Beothucks is any indication, this book needs more than a new preface to justify a new printing. Granted that parts of it are timeless, it should receive a thorough overhaul before being put on the market again.

The Beothucks are served much better in a children's book, *The Red Ochre People* (North Vancouver, J.J. Douglas, 1977). The author, Ingeborg Marshall, is a scholar who has published articles on Beothuck artifacts in *Man in the Northeast*

² Harold Horwood, "New Light on the History and Culture of the Beothuck Indians" (typescript, Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1959).

and *Canadian Collector*.³ The text and illustrations of this book are well presented, clear and straightforward. The result is the most balanced and informative brief account of the history of the Beothucks available to readers of any age. On a larger scale is Frederick W. Rowe's *Extinction: The Beothucks of Newfoundland* (Toronto, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1977). Rowe is a senator from Newfoundland, and a descendant of some of the settlers in the Notre Dame area who were involved in the last days of the Beothucks. His object in writing the book is frankly exculpatory, "to put to rest some of the more intemperate allegations" (p. 2) of cruelty and wholesale slaughter. He cites ten myths that have been accepted as fact and proceeds to demolish them. He does not hide the destruction wrought on the Beothucks but maintains that it was the work of a handful of men "probably never exceeding a dozen or more at any one time" (p. 145). He decries the murderous propensities of John Peyton Sr., an acknowledged Indian killer, and characterises the son's punitive expedition of 1819 as "incredibly stupid and ill-considered" (p. 66). Nevertheless, Rowe maintains, Peyton was provoked, as were others before him, by the Beothucks' habit of stealing from the fishing settlements.

Obviously, a book of this sort runs the danger of straying as far from objectivity as the writings of the most ardent of the mythmakers. When he states that whites in the mid-eighteenth century sought to avoid conflict out of respect for the natives' way of life, Rowe is making unsubstantiated assertions as extreme as those he denounces in others. But overall he retains a commonsense objectivity. He deals with the origins and way of life of the Beothucks, and suggests that religious taboos may have played some part in their avoiding contact with outsiders. He speculates about their numbers, taking into account the ecological limitations of their island home, and argues that new diseases probably played as large a part in their demise as did gunshot. On specific points, he dismisses as nonsense the old story that the French incited Micmac Indians to kill the Beothucks for a head bounty. He rightly emphasises the importance of salmon and furs that gave the conflict an economic base, and his claim that few whites were involved in the destruction is far closer to the truth than the impression that all Newfoundlanders disported themselves shooting Beothucks at every opportunity. This book is a useful corrective to the flights of bloody fancy indulged in by writers who have been swept away on a tide of indignation.

Nevertheless, the grisly fate of the Beothucks still leaves much to be explained. As Senator Rowe puts it: "we end as we began — with questions, speculations, contradictions, and few answers" (p. 156). But he raises two matters in his concluding pages that could add to the few answers available. Rowe quotes a statement that the Beothucks "have vanished from Newfoundland and for the same reason as the Tasmanians vanished from Tasmania" (p. 157). This analogy can

³ "A New Collection of Beothuck Indian Decorated Bone Pieces", *Man in the Northeast*, 8 (1974), pp. 41-55; "The Beothuck Indians", *Canadian Collector* (March/April, 1975), pp. 15-9.

indeed be of service in explaining what happened to the Red Ochre People. The aborigines of Tasmania were a hunter-gatherer-fisher people, much as the Beothucks, but their destruction was far more swift, from a known population of 4,000 when persistent contact began in 1803 to a mere handful by 1830. The Tasmanians were killed because white farmers needed their land, a situation that had no parallel in Newfoundland. But even where the whites were not farmers, their presence was just as destructive. The sealers in the Bass Strait Islands off the north east coast of Tasmania lived far from the sketchy authority of Hobart, under conditions that no white woman would tolerate. Consequently, they raided native villages and carried off the women; most sealers had from two to five slave-women who worked the boats, caught the seals, and produced numerous half-breed children. If the seizure of these women made life supportable for the whites, the loss of these same women destroyed the aborigines: in 1830 all that remained were sixty-five men, five women, and no children.⁴

Senator Rowe's second point is that Beothuck women probably suffered sexual assault from the whites. The furriers and salmon catchers who lived on the northeast coast of Newfoundland were as far removed from the sketchy authority of St. John's as any Bass Strait sealer was from Hobart. The local attitude to women was shown in the despairing complaint of the magistrate at Fogo when he had to hear a charge of rape. A bad woman, he wrote, had recently arrived from St. John's and "I have always discouraged the brining [sic] such kind of Creatures among my People if even lawfully married". And, he continued, "I never omit informing my Servants . . . of the heinousness of making any attempt of carrying themselves unbecoming towards Women".⁵ Possibly the fishermen who came from England for the season could afford to bide their time, but the same could not be true of the salmon catchers and furriers who were year round residents. If white women were in short supply, and the presence even of married ones was frowned upon by those in authority, where else would the men turn? Where, indeed, had settlers in predominantly male colonies throughout the world ever turned? And yet amidst all the boastings about killing there is not one story of sexual conquest. Could the furriers of Newfoundland have been less prurient than the sealers of Tasmania? Furriers could easily have raided Beothuck camps near the trap lines, killed the men and lived with the women through the winter: there would have been sex, shelter and stored food enough until spring came. Then the women could be abandoned. The anonymous female brought to St. John's in 1803 by William Cull might have been the survivor of one such incident, her usefulness prolonged by the fact that the

⁴ N.J.B. Plomely, ed., *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journal and Papers of George Augustus Robinson, 1829-1834* (Hobart, 1966), pp. 23-4.

⁵ Jeremiah Coghlan to Governor Montague, 13 September 1778, GN2/1/7, pp. 141-3, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador [hereafter PANL].

government was paying a £50 reward for a live Beothuck.

If miscegenation took place, where are the half-breeds? They could be the occasional infants saved from death: the anonymous little girl taken at Fogo in 1758; John August, exhibited as a child at Poole, Dorset, who became a boatman at Catalina; Tom June, who also worked in the fisheries and was rumoured to have once taken his patron on a visit to the Red Indians. These last two were engaged in the white man's work, just as were the half-breed children of the Bass Strait sealers. Lt. Buchan, the only man to write of his visit to a Beothuck camp, noted "a female bearing all the appearance of an European, with light sandy hair" (Rowe, p. 144). A story that Rowe accurately describes as a myth-transfer takes on new significance in this context. A fisherman was kidnapped by the Beothucks and lived with them for more than a year. He eventually escaped, hotly pursued, to some of his friends in a boat near to shore. A woman waded out after him, holding aloft an infant, begging him to return. When he ignored her pleas she cut the child in two, throwing one half towards him and "the other, she pressed to her bosom, in an agony of grief" (p. 104).

Interviewed at Southern Head Harbour in 1966, an old-timer explained: "I spose they pitched up 'ere in Narrises Arm . . . some a dem Beatons and Peytons and all as dey was. Dey was half Indians derselves see. Oh yes dey was, dem Beatons, yes dey was. They're mother, what I mean to say, their grand-mother was Indian, Indian descent, yeah". And a would-be local historian of Harbour Main recalled: "Well I had a notion one time to go and dig in, get . . . all the information I could when I was a youngster, I thought I could write up a, kind of synopsis of the history of this settlement and then I discovered that there was too, too damn many skeletons in cupboards twas better [laugh] to leave it alone".⁶

Since no one was bashful about murder, what other skeletons might there be? Folklore at such a remove may not be very useful as historical evidence, were it not for the fact that Cormack's own suspicions were running along these lines in the 1820s. When Shanawdithit, the last of her people, was captured, she was taken briefly to St. John's and then returned to the north where she became a servant in Peyton's household. Cormack wondered why she had been whisked away before anyone could learn to talk to her. He suspected one of the Fogo settlers, J.H. Brooking, of having something to do with it: "this man was one of her Tribe taken at a mature age & *familiarized* among us before her and merely that itself is worth any man's consideration and investigation".⁷ What, precisely, did Cormack mean by that? Senator Rowe also wonders why Shanawdithit was allowed "to vegetate in the Peyton household". The answer may be that there was something to hide,

⁶ Ms C-311/66-25, pp. 21-5; Ms C-25/74-9, pp. 3-4, Memorial University Folklore Archives, St. John's.

⁷ Loose fragment, Howley Papers, PANL.

something that so far had not entered the record. Peyton taught her little English in the five years she was with him, and he was outraged when the Beothuck Institution took her under its wing: in fact, she was taken in his absence, and Cormack had to write a placatory letter to assure him that it was merely a coincidence that he was away from home at the time.⁸ Peyton would not have surrendered Shanawdithit of his own free will. Why? If Cormack learned anything from her about miscegenation or passing, the accounts have not been found.

Peyton's motives may have been no more than economic self-interest. Those who are impressed by economic motivation will see an instructive coincidence in the fact that as soon as it was reasonably certain the Beothucks were all dead, Peyton began to plan a saw mill, an expensive fixed installation it would have been foolish to build in the vicinity of marauding Indians. He required timber for the saw mill and petitioned for a grant of a hundred acres at each of his twelve fishing stations along the Exploits River, small grants that could easily merge into one giant forest holding.⁹ Shanawdithit could have been an important bargaining counter in obtaining those grants.

The file on the Beothucks is not yet closed.¹⁰ New manuscripts still come to light. The Public Archives of Canada recently purchased the papers of Admiral Duckworth, one of Newfoundland's naval governors, and among the collection is a letter from Lt. Buchan that contains an important addendum to William Cull's narrative of 1810. Interviewing members of that expedition, Buchan found that they had forgotten to mention discovering a wigwam large enough for fifty or sixty people, and "several indications displayed by the Natives, of bartering, and tokens of peace; as leaving things in exchange, and Bows without strings".¹¹ Considering that it has been generally accepted that the Beothucks shunned contact with the whites, it is interesting to know that Cull deliberately suppressed these overtures in making his report; it would be even more interesting to know whether there had been any people in the wigwam his party discovered.

On 18 May 1836, the House of Commons' Select Committee on Aborigines put a question to Captain Buchan. Did the Beothucks "never enter into any projects of barter with us? — They never had an opportunity; there appears to have been a fatality in everything that was undertaken".¹² That judgement will stand unchallenged.

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⁸ Cormack to Peyton, 28 October 1828, Provincial Reference Section, Public Library, St. John's.

⁹ 14 September 1826, GN2/2/8, pp. 214-20, PANL. Peyton received 200 acres.

¹⁰ See L.F.S. Upton, "The Extermination of the Beothucks of Newfoundland", *Canadian Historical Review*, LVIII (1977), pp. 133-53.

¹¹ Buchan to Duckworth, 2 August 1810, Duckworth Papers, Public Archives of Canada.

¹² Question 4221, *Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements)* . . . printed 5 August, 1836 (London, 1836), p. 77.