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Scavengers and Caretakers: Beothuk/ European Settlement Dynamics in Seventeenth-Century Newfoundland

PETER E. POPE

IN 1680 an "Account of his Majesties Plantations in America" noted "a Colony of English settled upon the Eastern Coast of Newfoundland without Government Ecclesiastical or Civil who live by catching Fish" (Anon. c. 1680). These fisher-folk were few in number: the over-wintering population along the English Shore was never much more than 2000 and the French around Placentia numbered less than 700 (Mannion and Handcock 1987; Williams 1987: 7). They are sometimes overlooked, in the interest of emphasizing a perfectly valid generalization: the early modern Newfoundland fishery was predominantly a seasonal, migratory adventure. There were, nevertheless, fishing masters who, with their wives, children and even some of their servants considered themselves and were considered inhabitants of Newfoundland long before the island underwent its major wave of settlement c. 1800 (Pope 1992: 198-256). These people are, surely, no more to be forgotten than the Beothuk, who probably numbered no more than 1000 at European contact c. 1500, or the Norse, several dozen of whom resided briefly, at the tip of the Great Northern Peninsula, five centuries earlier (Pastore 1992: 13; Linderoth Wallace 1986). The early residents of the English Shore are of interest because they lived by catching fish, because they often lived without formal government and because they were one of the first ripples in the tidal wave of European migration to North America.

The first post-medieval European settlements in Newfoundland, at Cupids, Renews and Ferryland, were, as elsewhere along the North Atlantic littoral, proprietary colonies, that is, planned settlement projects backed by metropolitan investors. As elsewhere, these early proprietary colonies failed, at least in the financial sense. Although a few of the early colonists remained in Newfoundland

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after the colonial proprietors ceased to subsidize them, early population growth depended largely on informal settlement (Cell 1982a). One of the fundamental questions we can ask about informal English settlement in Newfoundland is why a resident population established itself in a region dominated by a migratory industry. The question is not new. The most important policy issue concerning Newfoundland in late seventeenth-century England was whether the Newfoundland planters were a necessary part of the cod fishery.

After the Restoration of 1660 the inhabitants of Newfoundland faced a challenge not merely to "settled government" but to settlement itself (Matthews 1968: 200- 239). In the late 1670s the Committee for Trade and Plantations decided, in the end, to accept settlement. The arguments of a vocal anti-planter faction among the West Country fishing interests have, nevertheless, enjoyed a rhetorical after-life. Some historians, for example Gillian Cell, argue that "the successful exploitation of the Newfoundland fishery did not require settlement", or as J.G. Davies puts it: "the fishery...had no place for a settled population" (Cell 1982b; Davies 1980: 365). Disinterested contemporaries thought otherwise. Furthermore, some seventeenth-century defenses of plantation suggest an economic logic to informal settlement in Newfoundland which accords well not only with our current understanding of the historical fishery as a common-property resource but also with archaeological evidence recovered in the course of recent excavations at Boyd's Cove, Notre Dame Bay, and Ferryland, on the Southern Shore.

Historical archaeology is, for better or worse, a discipline without an accepted research paradigm (Deetz, 1983). A common approach is to review regional history, catalogue the results of an excavation and then use the latter as illustrations of the former, so that history and archaeology are made rhetorically contiguous. Even when issues are raised the whole is not often more than the sum of its parts. This lack of methodological rigour may be the result of the peculiar history of the discipline. Because archaeology in the Old World has been understood as an approach to history and in the New World as anthropology, when the study of European archaeological sites in the Americas began, there developed a tug of war between those who saw historical archaeology as a kind of history and those who saw it as anthropology (Schuyler 1978). It is, inevitably, both; that is, historical archaeology is a kind of historical anthropology and must come to grips with both historical explanation and anthropological hypotheses (Deagan 1988).

From this perspective, three aspects of the relationship between archaeology and history are particularly important. First, since archaeological data are most useful in understanding long term patterns of behaviour rather than specific events, the results of archaeological research are more likely to articulate constructively with the socio- economic study of the longue durée rather than with the political history of élites. Historians must observe a "Rule of Least and Best", gathering the least amount of best evidence needed to solve the questions at hand. This pedestrian constraint suggests a second point: archaeology is most likely to serve history effectively in those sub-disciplines dealing with material culture itself: material

history in general and the history of consumer demand in particular (Carson 1978). Third, and this point follows from the others, historical archaeology has the potential to illuminate the lives of the illiterate (or non-literate) and the ignored, among whom we must count not only the Native people of Newfoundland but most of the European inhabitants of the early modern fishing periphery as well (Glassie 1977; Trigger 1985: 168; Pope 1992: 271-276).

To understand why European fisher-folk tried to find a foothold in Newfoundland, despite the failure of the proprietary colonies, we must understand something about the fishery itself. The English fishery at Newfoundland in the seventeenth century was an inshore industry, prosecuted from boats rather than from the ships which brought fishermen from the West Country. As Lewes Roberts explained in his *Marchants Mappe of Commerce* of 1638, fishermen would "unrigge their ships, set up boothes and cabanets on the shore in divers creeks and harbours, and there with fishing provisions and salt, begin their fishing in shallops and boates" (Roberts 1638: 57; Downing 1676a; Collins 1682: 93). Augustine Fitzhugh made this graphically obvious in his 1693 map of the fishery (Figure 1). It was only after 1713 that British ships began to engage in the offshore bank fishery; in the seventeenth century English "fishing" ships did not fish (Head 1976: 63).

Boats for the seventeenth-century Newfoundland fishery were, as the St. John's planter John Downing noted, "Built in the Country...of the Country Wood" (Downing 1676b). Migratory crews took it for granted that they would be able to buy boats or the lumber to build them in Newfoundland (Marston 1708). By the later seventeenth century boat-building and lumbering had become important off-season activities for the planters. Migratory crews had comparable non-piscatory tasks. They would spend a month at the beginning of each season reproducing the infrastructure of their industry. They constructed their stages, flakes, cookrooms and cabins of fir posts, creating enclosed spaces with a wattle of woven boughs, sealed on the inside with fir rinds and roofed with rinds and turf or a sail (Yonge 1663-1669: 56: Denys 1672: 531-534). Sometimes the crews' lodging was a simple tilt, a tent of fir poles and a canvas sail, or their ship itself might be careened and used as the centre-piece of an extended tilt. The largest of these structures was the stage, the combination wharf and processing plant where the fish was unloaded. This was a wooden quay projecting up to 60 m from shore, with a partially-closed one-story structure at its seaward end (Denys 1672: 532-533). The light construction of shore structures and the frequency with which they were recycled as firewood at the end of the season suggests that they will usually have very low archaeological visibility (Berry 1675a; Faulkner 1985). The carefully-laid seventeenth-century foundations uncovered in recent archaeological investigations at the Pool Plantation in Ferryland, under the direction of James Tuck, are mute testimony to the fact that these were not the temporary structures of a migratory venture but part of the infrastructure of a well-capitalized resident industry (Tuck 1985; Tuck and Robbins 1986; Pope 1992: 144-177).

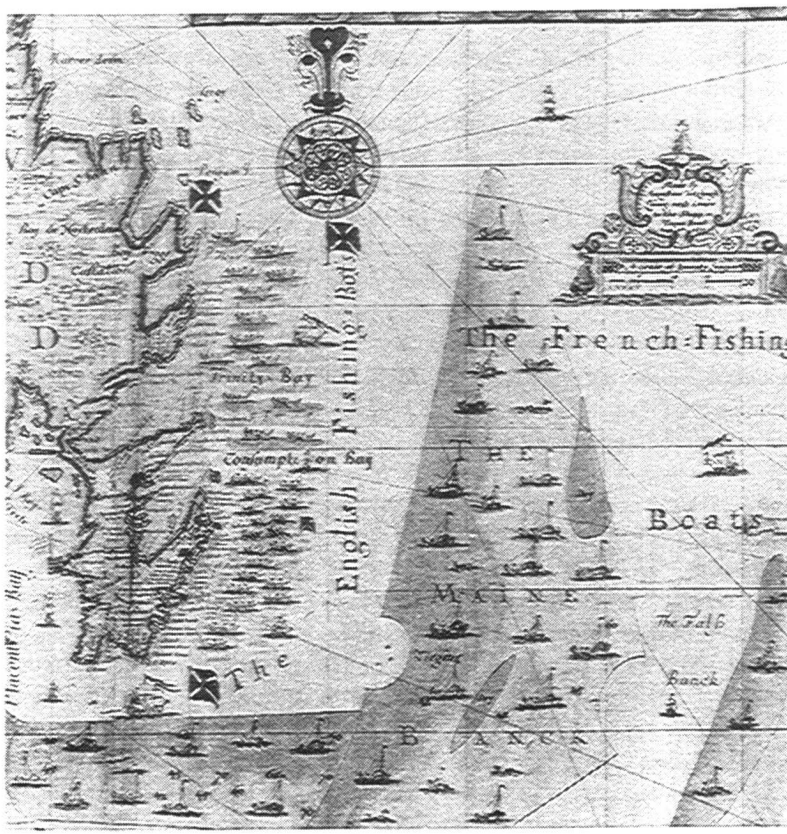

Fig. 1 Augustine Fitzhugh, "New Found Land", 1693, detail of "The English Fishing Boats" and "The French Fishing Boats". *British Library Add ms 5414, f30.*

By the mid-seventeenth century others, besides the West Country ships, participated in the Newfoundland fishery, either from a different base of operations, or on a completely different scale, or both. Major planters, like Sir David Kirke at Ferryland, owned ships which brought crews and supplies to Newfoundland, as well as large, permanent, fishing stations and fleets of fishing boats. Planters operating on this scale were, in effect, Newfoundland-based merchants, with close kin and commercial ties to trading houses in London and the West Country (Pope 1992: 177-197, 276-283). Most Newfoundland-based operations were, however, smaller. Precisely because the seventeenth- century fishery at Newfoundland was an inshore fishery, it was possible to enter it as the owner of just one or two boats, employing a few other men and relying on specialized cargo vessels, or sack ships, to buy the catch. Most of these small employers were inhabitants but some, known as bye-boat keepers, took passage out and back on the so-called "fishing" ships and

left their boats in Newfoundland every winter, under the care of cooperative planters (Matthews 1968: 162-171). This mode of production became common after the Restoration, particularly around St. John's, and the bye-boats accounted for an increasing proportion of catches. Contemporaries often considered bye-boat men and planters in the same breath and sometimes even equated them under the rubric of "boatkeeper" (Yonge 1663-1669: 119; Talbot 1679). Census figures suggest that most bye-boat operations were on the same scale as those of the average planter. Two boats was the modal scale of operation for planters and Captain Talbot, the Royal Navy Commodore at Newfoundland in 1679, observed that "Few of the Colony Keepe above 3 boats" (Talbot 1679).

It is not difficult to see how bye-boat men found an economic niche in the competitive world of the fishery. The "fishing" ships came to Newfoundland essentially in ballast (that is, with limited cargo) and the emergence of sack ship market transports meant many of the "fishing" ships would return to England laden only with relatively small cargoes of train oil (Wheler 1684a). This was incentive for fishing masters to carry passengers at competitive rates (Matthews 1968: 165). In the 1670s each one-way passenger paid 30s to £2 (Berry 1675a). By making it possible for bye-boats to market their catches in Newfoundland, the sack ships made it profitable for some "fishing" ships to carry competitors to the fishery. Bye-boat keepers thus escaped the unpredictable shipping overheads of the ship-based fishery or, rather, paid a fraction of this overhead in the predictable form of passage money. This sector of the fishery therefore attracted those with moderate capital (Matthews 1968: 166; Wheler 1684b). In the censuses of the 1670s and 1680s bye-boat keeping is limited essentially to the St. John's area. There were many independent units of production competing with one another among the "fishing" ships and bye-boat keepers in that major harbour. The marginal cost in reduced catches to any one ship of introducing yet another bye-boat competitor was probably smaller than the profit to be earned from passage-money.

The economic niche occupied by the inhabitants of seventeenth-century Newfoundland is less obvious than the smaller niche occupied by their cousins, the bye-boat keepers. Like bye-boat keepers, most planters avoided shipping overheads by bringing in crews as passengers on "fishing" ships and by exporting catches on sacks. The planters, however, had to shoulder the expense of overwintering. What economic contribution were planters supposed to make which might balance this cost?

The economic case for Newfoundland settlement was cogently argued, in 1678, by Nehemiah Troute, a Plymouth man experienced in the migratory fishery, who had returned to Newfoundland in 1675 as purser of HMS *SWANN* and who was asked for his opinions by the Committee for Trade and Plantations in 1678 (Troute 1678). Troute was then, as he put it, "a person indifferent" and uncommitted to either the merchant adventurers of England's West Country or the inhabitants of Newfoundland. Comparable pro-settlement positions were pressed from the 1660s on (Pope 1992: 56). Sir John Berry defended settlement after his experience as

naval commodore in 1675 (Matthews 1968: 219-220). Like Berry, Trout stressed ways in which the inhabitants benefited the migratory fishery:

> 1. In spring, ships sent boat crews ahead to claim fishing rooms (the tracts of shorefront used for the fishery) from as much as 30 leagues offshore and these crews depended on inhabitants for shelter (Berry 1676). (Presumably this would happen when ships were becalmed or fighting prevailing westerlies.)
> 2. The inhabitants cut timber and produced lumber, boats and oars for the migratory fishery.
> 3. The inhabitants were "possessors of the Country for his Majestie". If Newfoundland were taken by France, it would prejudice the fishery and England's trade with the West Indies.

Troute added an important argument:

> 4. The inhabitants acted as care-takers for boats left to over-winter by migratory fishermen. (Troute's employers had paid £2 for the care of 20 boats.)

Troute and Berry agreed that the planter fishery was as useful to Britain as was the migratory West Country fishery at Newfoundland:

> 5. Inhabitants trained proportionately as many men as the migratory ships and were thus also "a nursery of seamen".
> 6. The inhabitants spent their earnings on English agricultural produce and manufactures.

Finally, as Berry had done, Troute refuted two of the charges most often made against the planters, that they destroyed fishing rooms in the off season and that they pre-empted rooms that were needed by migratory fishermen:

> 7. It was migratory fishermen who destroyed fishing rooms by selling off their own stages, by shipping the timber home, and even by dismantling competitors' stages.
> 8. Disputes over fishing rooms happened because the *admiral*, or first migratory ship to arrive in each harbour, would take as much territory as it could, in order to eliminate competitors.

Troute omitted two arguments to justify settlement proposed, respectively, by Berry and the lobbyist James Houblon:

> 9. The inhabitants of Newfoundland were poor and unskilled in any trade but the fishery and would therefore burden any English parish to which they were returned (Berry 1675a).
> 10. The inhabitants could produce fish cheaper and of better quality than the migratory fishermen (Houblon 1675).

The latter was a questionable argument. Even proponents of "settled" government admitted that the cost of over- wintering inhabitants equalled the transit costs of the "fishing" ships, unless the inhabitants could be kept fishing most of the year (Anon. 1675; Poole 1677; Wheler 1684a). The positive justifications for Newfoundland settlement were those Troute stressed: accommodation of early or marooned crews, access to timber for boats and other wood products, care-taking and finally, protection of British sovereignty. Accommodations or lumber may have become important components of the planter economy but one doubts that their marginal benefits could have themselves triggered settlement. It is the two remaining arguments, micro and macro versions of a single rationale, that convincingly explain why the settlement of Newfoundland was, in Robert Hayman's phrase, "a business honorable, profitable, feasible, facill and opportune" (Hayman c. 1620). From the earliest proposals for settlement to the protracted late seventeenth-century debate on the need for government, the settlement of Newfoundland was justified, in great part, as a means of protecting the infrastructure of the British fishery (Parkhurst 1578; Whitbourne 1622; Wynne c. 1628; Kirke 1640). Why was such protection necessary?

The fishery is, notoriously, a common-property resource, that is, one which is difficult to enclose. Consequently, fishermen's territories are not protected from interlopers by conventional property rights (Gordon 1954; Ommer 1981). Competition among fishermen over access to the resource is therefore normal, and this was as true in the seventeenth- century as it is today. There is a vein of Newfoundland history rich with examples of conflict between migratory and settled fishermen (Matthews 1978; *e.g.* Prowse 1895; Cell 1969). In the seventeenth century contemporaries often saw these conflicts as examples of a wider phenomenon: an intense competition common among fisherman in general (Poole 1677; Talbot 1679). Nehemiah Troute described this kind of extra-legal competition vividly:

> ...the great grievance of fishing is from the masters difference between themselves, who rob each others stages and rooms to the merchants' great loss, for where... room is for 12 boats the Admiral (if [using] but 6 Boats) will... secure that room, besides pull[ing] up other stages and houses [for] half a mile (Troute 1678).

Such conflict was not peculiar to Newfoundland, it was widespread in coastal Maine and Massachusetts and the French had to deal with similar problems. One American historian ascribes the unruly behaviour of West Country fishermen at Gloucester and Marblehead to cultural incompatibilities, but the culture of these immigrants was rooted in the economics of the fishery (Heyrman 1984: 36ff., 214; Clark 1970: 29ff.; Vickers 1985). Fishing crews of various origins were capable of destroying each other's stages and stealing each other's boats, as the reiteration of both French and English regulations against such practices suggest (Matthews 1975; Biggar 1901: 198). It was the economic logic of competition that led fishermen to do such things.

A migratory master who could depend on a resident to protect his boats, reserve fishing rooms and preserve his stages would have a competitive advantage, even if he had to pay for it. Payment often took the form of rent during Sir David Kirke's administration of the south Avalon in the 1640s and the practice continued there and around St. John's (Parker 1667; Swanley 1663; Wheler 1684a). Once one fishing master in an area had a winter care-taker, such care-takers would become necessary for his competitors. Fishermen whose equipment was left unprotected were at the mercy of those whose boats and rooms were secure (Cull 1667; Luce 1667; Pitcher 1667; Hooper and Gearing 1675). Even the relationship between French and English fishermen in Newfoundland can be seen in this light. If the French were to continue fishing in proximity to the permanent English settlements which developed in the mid seventeenth-century it was, in some sense, inevitable that they would set up their own colony of resident fishermen to protect their seasonal stations, as they did at Placentia in 1662 (Proulx 1979: 12ff.). Conversely, the existence of French settlement became a strong argument for the maintenance of the English fishing settlements (Martin 1678). After the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 French settlement was no longer officially possible. French metropolitan fishermen continued, however, to regard English settlement as an immense competitive advantage, which they sought to limit in the political forum (Brière 1990: 219-246).

The earliest organized colonies were made for a variety of motives, which usually included securing access to the fishery (Cell 1982a). Initial informal settlement may have been encouraged by an economic pressure on the Newfoundland fishery which has only recently been recognized. This pressure was exerted by Newfoundland's Native people, the Beothuk, who treated seasonally-abandoned fishing premises as stores of iron, particularly nails. Early-modern forged nails were easily reworked into useful tools, like the well-fashioned projectile points and scrapers excavated at Boyd's Cove, Notre Dame Bay, under the direction of Ralph Pastore (Figure 2) (Pastore 1987, MacLean 1989). Each fishing boat would contain about 1200 nails plus other iron work, a fishing stage thousands of nails (Downing 1676b). The easiest way to obtain these would be to burn the equipment in question. The Beothuks' pilfering relationship with Europeans thus annually threatened the infrastructure of the fishery and occasionally led to open conflict (Kirke 1639). There is little evidence that the Natives had, in the pre-contact period, regularly exploited the Avalon Peninsula south of Trinity Bay (Whitbourne 1622: 149; Pastore 1986: Table 1). The recovery of a worked stone biface (Figure 3) in an aboriginal context of a hearth and lithic debris, sandwiched between late sixteenth-century European contexts at Ferryland, suggests that the Beothuk scavenged there, as they would a century later in their northern refugium in Notre Dame Bay, the no man's land between the English and French shores (Tuck 1989; Pastore 1987). In the late sixteenth century the Beothuk subsistence environment had not yet changed from that of the pre-contact period, except for the presence of iron-using Europeans at seasonal fishing stations like Ferryland. It

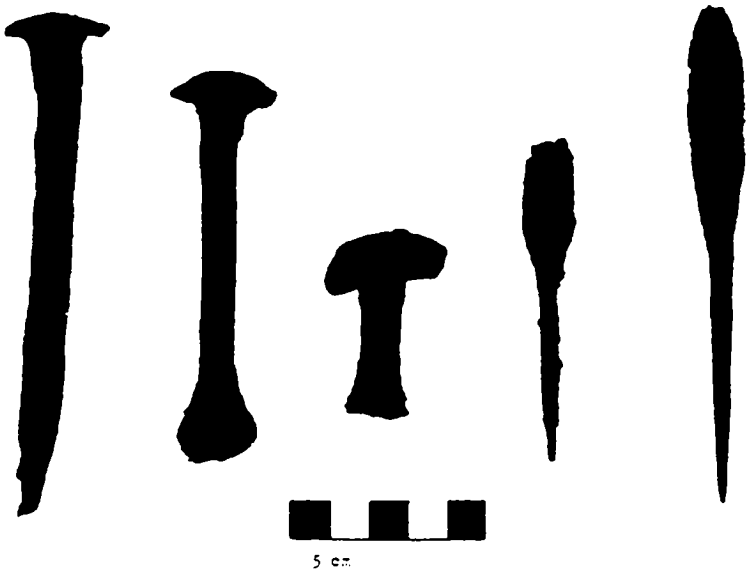

Fig. 2 From the left: wrought iron nail, of a size favoured by Beothuk iron-workers; nail modified, apparently as a scraper; discarded nail head, from which the shaft has been removed; arrowhead manufactured from a nail; another similar arrowhead. (After Pastore 1992: 31).

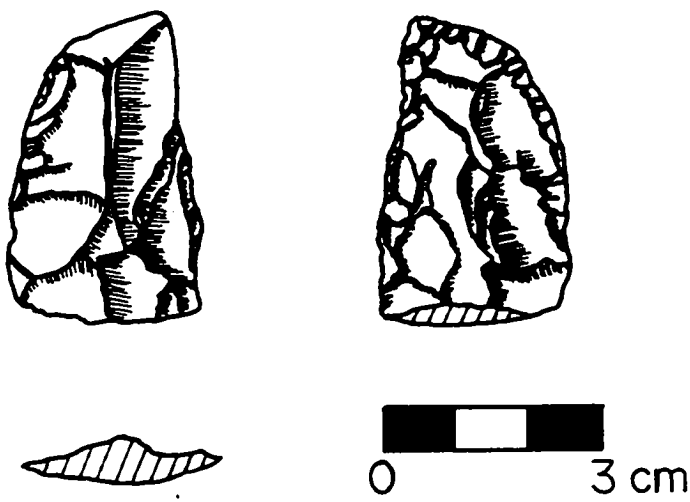

Fig. 3 Stone biface (CgAf-2: 3527), from the Ferryland Waterfront (Area C, stratum 7), excavated below a European context of c. 1600 and above a European context, probably dating before 1580. (After Pope 1992: 64)

therefore seems reasonable to suspect that what had drawn them beyond their traditional range was the presence of these interlopers and the new materials they brought with them.

The documentary record shows that Beothuk damage to boats and other infrastructure was a factor in encouraging initial settlement after the settlement frontier had moved northwards. In 1680 the Mayor of Poole explicitly recognized the threat of aboriginal scavenging as one of the "Reasons for not Removing the Planters", just when many of his constituents were beginning to fish north of Bonavista: "The Indians having beene so bold this Last yeare, As to come into our harbor & doe mischeife" (Carter *et al.* 1680). We might reasonably suspect that earlier Beothuk scavenging would have constituted a significant incentive for initial settlement in various southern areas also, as the settlement frontier moved northward in successive periods. The record in the Rashleigh account books of what sounds like overwintering in Conception Bay in 1609 may be an echo of an early experiment with caretaking (a year before the proprietary colonization of Cupids) (Scantlebury 1978-81). Pastore has pointed out that avoidance by the Beothuk of reciprocal economic relations with Europeans left their small bands open to eventual economic eclipse when the coast was appropriated by permanent residents of European origin (Pastore 1989). What might be added to this dismal scenario is that a long-term scavenging relationship with the migratory fishery, in combination with the economic logic of a common-property resource, constituted a particularly fateful feedback loop — which may have linked the Beothuk world with the origins of informal English settlement in Newfoundland.

Given the failure of reciprocal economic relations between Beothuk and English and given the fact that northern woodland peoples generally did not have strong concepts of rights in non-portable property, Native scavenging at seasonally-abandoned fishing premises was virtually inevitable (Bailey 1969: xix; Brasser 1978). Such scavenging must have been a significant factor in the destruction of fisheries equipment left unattended within what appears to have been an expanded Beothuk fall and winter range. Whether or not the perpetrators were correctly identified, the migratory owners of stolen or damaged equipment would regard such acts as outrages (Parfay 1595). The obvious solution to such problems was the stationing of over-wintering care-takers. Because of the intense and often violent competition among fishermen, the existence of one resident in an area created an economic incentive for further settlement. Once settlement was established, other factors contributed to growth and persistence (Handcock 1989). It was, of course, this growth and persistence which eventually drove the Beothuk inland, away from the diverse coastal resources upon which their survival had for centuries depended.

On this interpretation, evidence of Beothuk presence at European sites is predicted in archaeological contexts just older than the earliest permanent English occupations, at those sites first occupied by the English, in various regions, in successive periods. Surveys have located a few seventeenth-century archaeological

sites on the English Shore, besides Ferryland. Examination of artifacts excavated some years ago at Cupids suggests that the site reported was not seventeenth-century but there are contexts of the period at Bristol's Hope, Clown's Cove and Renews (Barakat 1973; Pope 1989; Mills pers. comm.). The hypothesis offered here can be tested as such early modern sites are located and excavated.

The view that Newfoundland settlement was not economically "necessary" is, on this interpretation, mistaken. This view rests on an understanding of the fishery abstracted from the human context into which it had intruded and from the harsh realities of competition in an open-access capitalist industry based on a common-property resource outside the effective jurisdiction of a distant and often uninterested administration. The many arguments against the European settlement of Newfoundland did not affect the economic logic of the feedback mechanism presented here as an hypothesis about initial informal settlement. Such arguments simply posed questions about how a settled population was going to survive once it was established.

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