Remarks on Beothuk-settler relations

The country which the Red Indians (the Beothuk were referred to as Red Indians because of their practice of using red/ochre paint on their bodies) now inhabit, is chiefly about the River Exploit ... They were formerly (in the past) known to spread themselves much further, but it is thought they were then considerably more numerous than they are at present. In the winter it seems they reside chiefly on the banks of the Exploits, where they are enabled to procure a plentiful subsistence (catch enough food to live), as appeared by the abundance of horns and bones that lay scattered about their wigwams (dwellings) at the deer fences ... Other places ... of a like residence ... afford them the same kind of food, though not in such plenty; for (because) the channel of the Exploits, (is along a deer path), and must ... insure to them abundance (lots) of venison, while all the other places may yield (give) them no more than occasional supplies. In summer they live altogether ... on the sea-coast. Between the boundaries I have mentioned, of Cape John and Cape Frehel, is spread a vast multitude of islands abounding with (full of) sea-fowl, ptarmigan, hares and other game, besides seals in great numbers. On the largest of these islands are deer, foxes, bears and otters. Besides hunting all these, they used ... to kill considerable quantities of salmon in the rivers and small streams; but the English have now only left them in possession of Charles’s (River) and another brook.

... On the part of the English fishers, it is an inhumanity which sinks them far below the level of savages (the English fisherman have acted more inhumanly than the Beothuk). The wantonness (needlessness) of their cruelties towards the poor wretches (the Beothuk), has frequently been almost incredible. One well-known fact shall serve as a specimen (an example). A small family of Indians (were) in their wigwam, by a party of fishermen ... (and) fled to avoid ... the instant death that threatened them from the fire-arms of their enemies; when one woman being unable to make her escape, yielded herself (gave up) into their power. Seeing before her none but men, she might naturally have expected that her sex alone would have disarmed their cruelty (being a woman would stop them from harming her) ... she pointed with an air of most moving entreaty to her prominent belly (pregnant belly) .... But this appeal, Oh, shame to humanity! was alas! in vain; for an instant stab, that ripped open her womb, laid her at the feet of those cowardly ruffians, where she expired in great agonies.

-Lieutenant John Cartwright
1768

A Report on settler and Beothuk relations

To correct the flagrant (deliberate/obvious) cruelties which I am well assured have been for many years past exercised on (acted upon) the native Indians of Newfoundland (commonly known by the name of Red Indians (Beothuk)) I beg leave to submit (I would like to share) the following ideas to His Majesty's Government.

As that part of the Island (Newfoundland) which is inhabited and frequented by the Indians is resorted to only by the salmon Catchers and Furriers (fur trappers) and there being no Person of sufficient authority or influence to endeavour (try) to control them or conciliate the affections (make peace/friendly relations) of a race of People (the Beothuk) who I conceive (think) could they be impressed with a sufficient degree of confidence (if we treat them in an appropriate manor) might be soon induced (persuaded) to forget the animosities (violent acts) which have hitherto (until now) subsisted (continually happened) so that eventually a commercial intercourse (trade relationship) might be established which would undoubtedly prove beneficial to the Merchants trading to the North part of Newfoundland .... The salmon-catchers and Furriers will also benefit by the intercourse (trade), many of those people have promis’d me every information and assistance they can give requesting at the same time that any Cruelties they may already have been obliged (forced) to commit (against the Beothuk) may be buried in oblivion (forgotten).

(Signed)
Georg Christopher Pulling, 1786

As quoted in Ingeborg Marshall and George Christopher Pulling, Reports and letters by George Christopher Pulling relating to the Beothuk Indians of Newfoundland (St. John’s, NL: Breakwater, 1989), pp. 50, 120.
July the 30th. 1792. Trinity

Maurice Kennedy a Boats-master in Mr. Lester’s employ, came here from the north part of this Isle and made me acquainted with a conversation which pass’d a few days since between Him and John Mcdonald, a planter who resides (lives) a Tilton Harbor, which is three or four leagues from Fogo Harbor.

Mcdonald told him that He, with four other men were on the Funk Island to get Birds Eggs and on Saturday the 7th, when they saw two canoes which they knew must belong to the Native savages of this Country paddling towards the Isle– When they came within shot McD (Mcdonald) said he fir’d his piece (gun) which was loaded with mole shot directly into one of the Canoes and supposed he wounded some of the Indians who upon a second gun being fir’d at them paddled off...

As quoted in Ingeborg Marshall and George Christopher Pulling, Reports and letters by George Christopher Pulling relating to the Beothuk Indians of Newfoundland (St. John’s, NL: Breakwater, 1989), pp. 50, 120.
Settler treatment of the Beothuk
Excerpt from a report made by Chief Justice John Reeves in 1793.

John Reeves, Esq., Chief Justice of Newfoundland, being examined, said,

"Another subject is the state of the Wild Indians (the Beothuk) in the interior parts of the island .... It seems very extraordinary, but it is a fact known to hundreds in the northern part of the island, that there is no ... connection (relationship) ... between our people and the Indians but plunder (raid/theft), outrage and murder. If a wigwam is found it is plundered of the furs it contains, and is burnt; if an Indian is discovered he is shot at exactly as a fox or bear. This has gone on for years in Newfoundland, while Indians in all other parts of the King's dominions (lands claimed by Great Britain) have received benefit from their connection with us, either in the supply of their worldly necessities (items valuable for everyday use) by traffic (trade), or in being initiated (taught) in the principles of morality and religion; but such has been the policy respecting this island, that the residents for many years had little benefit of a regular government for themselves, and when they were so neglected (ignored), it is not to be wondered (not surprising) that the condition of the poor Indians was never mended (fixed)."

"... the Red Indians (Beothuk) had a great dread of the Micmas (Mi’kmaqs), whom they called Shannoc, and used to point to Shannoc Brook ... as the way by which they arrived in their country .... They were acquainted with another tribe of Indians, whom they called the Shaunamun, and with whom they were very friendly. These came from Labrador .... The Red Indians traded with these Shaunamuncs receiving stone hatchets and other implements from them, and they mutually visited each other's countries. This is some measure corroborates (supports) the supposition (uncertain belief), that the total disappearance of the Red Indians, for the last ten or fifteen years, is not due to their utter destruction, but to their passing (moving) over to the Labrador coast."

Mr. Peyton (an English settler who had many experiences with different First Nations groups in Newfoundland) entertained us with discoursing (telling stories) of the Red Indians (the Beothuk). He had frequently seen them, having found them on the Red Indians Lake and elsewhere. He had captured one of the women, who was taken to St. John's and who lived some time with Mrs. P. as a servant. He described them as a fierce and savage race ....

(....)

Many years ago they were very troublesome to the European settlers, frequently stealing boats, nets, and implements.

(....)

Their destruction, however, was not wholly due to the English, the French had a still greater hatred of them, and contempt of their lives, which they even to this day preserve.

(....)

The Mic-Mac Indians were, however, the most efficient instruments of their destruction; and according to the account which an old Mic-Mac Indian gave to Mr. Peyton, the first enmity (hostility) between the two races arose in this way. When the Mic-Macs first visited the country, they and the Red Indians were friendly. About a hundred years ago, however, the French offered a reward for the head of every Red Indian.
Journey in search of the Beothuk, 1810–1811

(On the number of Beothuk encountered) I shall be within bounds (it would be a fair guess) by observing that there could not be less than thirty-five grown persons. Of this number probably two-thirds were women, or it is likely that some of the men were absent.

(...)

It has been conceived (said) that want (lack) of sufficient quantity of nutritious food has prevented them (the Beothuk) from increasing, and the only thing connected with this idea is that they are not seen on the coast in such numbers as formerly (earlier). All else must be mere speculative reasoning (guesses), but it will be granted that my excursion (voyage) has opened up a field from which to draw a fair conclusion. It will be readily admitted that a country intersected throughout with rivers and ponds and abounding with (full of) wood and marshy ground is well adapted for uncivilized life, and ... vast herds of deer that annually visit it. This is proved by the incredible quantity of venison they had packed up ....

(...)

As (European settlers) ... advanced to the northward of Cape Freels, so were they (the Beothuk) obliged (forced) to retreat from the coast ... the evil (the settlers' cruelty) that forced the natives to retreat (leave the coast) brought with it the means whereby they led a more independent life, for as the fisheries increased and settlers became more numerous so were they (the Beothuk) enabled to procure (get) iron and other articles by plunder, and from wrecks .... Although it is still imagined that they from necessity, all come to the sea coast in the summer, as their canoes were seen last summer in various places between Cape John and Cape Freels .... This only tends to satisfy me more strongly in the opinion that their population is considerably more than is generally admitted, for circumstances determine that the greater number remains in the ponds and rivers for the purpose of procuring venison for the winter, and that those who come out are but a small division compared to the whole ....

(...)

I have already stated the party that I came up with (encountered) to be about 75 in number but surely it would be absurd to suppose that the whole of their tribe resided there .... To venture even a guess of their total numbers would be hazardous too much. I am however inwardly convinced that their numbers are considerable ....

Journey in search of the Beothuk, 1822

On the fourth day ... at a portage (river crossing) known as the In-dian path we found traces made by the Red Indians (the Beothuk), evi-dently in the spring or summer of the preceding year (the year be-fore) .... For some distance around, the trunks of many of the birch ... (and) spruce pine ... had been rinded (stripped of bark); these peo-ple using the inner part of the bark of that kind of tree for food. Some of the cuts of the trees with the axe, were evidently made the preceding year. The traces left by the Red Indians are so peculiar, that we were confident those we saw were made by them.

(....)

What arrests (captures) the attention most, while gliding down the stream, is the extent (length) of the Indian fences to entrap the deer .... There are openings left here and there in them, for the an-imals to go through and swim across the river, and at these places the Indians are stationed and kill them in the water with spears, out of their canoes, as at the lake. It was melancholy (depressing) to contemplate (think about) the gigantic, yet feeble efforts of a whole primitive nation, in their anxiety to provide subsistence, forsaken and going to decay.

There must have been hundreds of the Red Indians (the Beothuk), and that not many years ago, to have kept up these fences and pounds. As their numbers were lessened so was their ability to keep them (the fences) up for the purpose intended; and now the deer pass the whole line unmolested (untouched).

We infer, that the few of those people who yet survive have taken refuge in some ... spot, still in the northern part of the island and where they can procure (trap) deer to subsist on (live on).

Capture of three Beothuk women

You are doubtless (surely) aware that three of the Aborigines of this Island were brought to St. John’s about two years ago, and two of them died very shortly (from tuberculosis) after their return to the Bay of Exploits, the third, a woman about 18 or 19 years of age (Shanawdithit) is still alive, and from the person under whose charge she has since continued I understand that she has acquired a sufficient knowledge of the English language to communicate that information respecting her tribe which we have so long been desirous (trying) to obtain. She states that the whole number of her tribe did not exceed fifteen persons in the winter of 1823, and that they were obliged (forced) by the want (lack) of food to separate into three or four parties. Of these fifteen, two were shot by some of our settlers, one was drowned and three fell into our hands, so that only nine at the utmost remain to be accounted for, and Mr. Peyton (the person in whose house the Native Indian resides) tells me that from the circumstance of his not being able to discover the most distant trace of any of them for the two last winters he is convinced that they must all have perished.

Obituary of Shanawdithit

Obituary of Shanawdithit, published in The Royal Gazette, June 16, 1829. Shanawdithit is believed by most historians to have been the last Beothuk.

DIED, —On Saturday night, the 6th mst. at the Hospital, SHANA DW DITHIT, the female Indian, one of the Aborigines of this Island. —She died of consumption, a disease which seems to have been remarkably prevalent among her tribe, and which has unfortunately been fatal to all who have fallen into the hands of the settlers.

Beothuk weapons consisted of bows and arrows, two types of spears—one for caribou and inland animals, the other for seals and probably small whales—clubs, and especially in the latter part of the historic period, iron axes and knives. The Beothuk did not routinely have dogs or other domesticated animals, and at no time did they adopt the use of firearms.

The absence of dogs and the failure of the Beothuk to adapt to the use of firearms deserves special comment. The former [dogs] arouses both curiosity and speculation … One is tempted to wonder whether the fate of the Beothuk would have been delayed, or even perhaps avoided, had they possessed dogs as did other native groups, including the Eskimos [Inuit]. Certainly some of the atrocities [acts of violence] by Newfoundland settlers in Notre Dame Bay … would not have been possible had there been a few dogs around to give the alarm. Since those took place around 1790, it can be argued that the represented the crucial factor making the ultimate extinction [of the Beothuk] in the 1820’s inevitable ….

Equally puzzling is why, in spite of countless opportunities, the Beothuk never acquired guns. The simplistic answer sometimes offered is that they were terrified of those strange and deadly weapons, but other native groups were initially terrified of guns yet rapidly adjusted to them and soon learned to use them. Once more it is tempting to speculate how the course of Beothuk history might have been changed if somewhere along the line they had learned to use guns that they could have stolen from the European settlers as they did nets, traps, utensils, and tools.

Whatever our sentimental feelings may be for the primitive inhabitants [the Beothuk], all their history shows that the one ineradicable [permanent] feature in their character was an insatiable hatred [a hatred which could not be satisfied] of the pale faces [European settlers]. They must have known, if we give them credit for any intelligence, that this was a mission of peace [European arrival and settlement], and that there was no intention of injuring them. Every other motive in them seems instinct to kill the white man. There can be no doubt that the [European] settlers hunted them like wolves and shot them in cold blood [with no emotional reason] whenever they encountered them. The captured Indian woman, Shanawdithit, declared that the hatred of the white man was so strong amongst her people that she would not be again tolerated by her tribe [allowed back into her tribe] after speaking with Englishmen. With such feelings against the Europeans all attempts at reconciliation were fruitless. There are many conjectures [theories] about the ultimate fate of the Red Indians [the Beothuk]. Bonnycastle thinks they may have emigrated to the Canadians Labrador, and he mentions, in confirmation of this view, the arrival at the Bay of Seven Islands of a body of Indians who were neither mountaineers [Montagnais] nor Mic Macs [Mi’kmaq], whom he therefore conjectures [speculates] were the remnant [last] of our [Beothuk]. This may be so, but the general opinion of those who have studied the subject most closely is that the Red Indians [Beothuk] were exterminated partly by the settlers, and the Mic Macs, partly by famine and disease.

The hostility worked both ways; the natives were portrayed as savage, brutal and revengeful people, a people to be greatly feared. The Beothuk revenge took violent form in the beheading of their enemies, when news of these acts spread, the white man’s fear grew. The Beothuk sometimes killed white men and cut off their heads to be placed on poles. If they came across the grave of a white man, their practice was to drive a stake down through it.

For almost two and a half centuries these natives were ill-treated and considered a great inconvenience to the weak attempts at colonization [permanent settlements on Newfoundland]. The early settlers, first on the Avalon Peninsula [of Newfoundland] and then along the northeast coast [of Newfoundland], caused the few remaining members of the tribe to retreat farther into the interior of Newfoundland.

There were two Mi’kmaq tribes, the Shaunamuncs (Montagnais from Labrador), a friendly tribe, and the Shannocs (from Cape Breton), a tribe hated and feared by the Beothuk. The Mi’kmaq were offered bounties by the French for Beothuk heads, and many of them were equipped and experienced in the use of firearms …. By the late 1700s the Beothuk tribe, now dwindling greatly, was hemmed between [stuck between] the two, the settlers along the north-east coast and the Mi’kmaq to the west. This caused the remnants of the Beothuk tribe to make the area of the mighty Exploits River headwaters a final retreat.

A tradition existed amongst the Micmacs [Mi’kmaqs] as related by Mr W. E. Cormack [the man who attempted “to study and preserve” the Beothuk], who had it from some of themselves, that on their first coming over to this island [Newfoundland], amicable [friendly] relations existed between them and the Beothuk, until a certain act of diabolical [evil] treachery upon the part of the former [Mi’kmaqs], put an end for ever to all friendly intercourse ….

Mr J. B. Jukes gives [an account of this friendship and treachery which follows] “When the Micmacs first visited the country, they and the Red Indians [Beothuk] were friendly. About a hundred years ago, however, the French offered a reward for the head of every Red Indian. To gain this reward, the Micmacs privately shot some of them ….”

The above tradition of the Micmac’s appears to me to be open to very considerable doubt in many respects. The statement that the French had offered a reward for the heads of any Red Indians brought to them, is at variance with [contradicts] the general treatment accorded the native tribes of America by that nation [the French], and is hard to believe. The French, it is well known, always held that the Indians were human beings, with souls to be saved, not mere animals to be destroyed.

The lowest estimate of the size of the Beothuk population when white men settled Newfoundland in the 16th century is my own—something between 3000 and 5000. This estimate is based on the minimum number of bands known to have existed at that time, and the numbers ascribed to the typical Beothuk band by settler tradition. However … estimates by other writers … range up as high as 50 000 …. In Newfoundland before the coming of the white men the Beothuk had a hunting ground which supplied an abundance of game …. As permanent [European] settlement spread … there was no law except that each man defended what he had with his musket, it soon became the policy of most Newfoundlanders to shoot an Indian whenever one showed his nose …. The raids of the white men against the Beothuk were unequalled anywhere in North America for sheer cruelty and ferocity …. They shot Indian men in the back as they ran away, and they butchered Indian women as they knelt … begging for mercy. When they had killed all the adults in a Beothuk band, they would round up the children and cut their throats …. 

... the last great Beothuk chief, Nonsbawsut. He was a noted hunter …. Before he was elected to the chieftainship, the tribe was tottering on the very edge of extinction, living in scattered families all over the basins of Exploits and Indian Rivers, and slowly dying from starvation—for Beothuk hunting methods, especially their system of trapping Caribou in the water, demanded the cooperation of a fairly large body of men, and single families often went hungry. Nonsbawsut brought the tribe together again, and kept it together as long as he lived. Moreover, the decline in Beothuk numbers was stopped, the birth rate was still strong, and the number of children growing up in the tribe equalled the number being killed off by white men and Micmacs [Mi’kmaqs]. If he had lived out a normal life span, Nonsbawsut might have been able to restore the Beothuk, and save the race from extermination.

However … he was murdered by a party of white men from Notre Dame Bay …. The killing of their [the Beothuk’s] chief was the death blow to the Beothuk. They scattered once more into little groups, and again were stalked by starvation.

Harold Horwood, The Story of the Beothuk (Lisboa: s.n., 1959), part 1, p.5; part 4, pp. 1–4; part 5, pp. 3–4.