

The Collapse of the Beothuk World

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The Collapse of the Beothuk World*

UNTIL RECENTLY, THE BEOTHUKS, NEWFOUNDLAND'S ABORIGINAL people who became extinct in 1829, were a shadowy people whose origins, culture, and demise were little understood. In the past 15 years, however, archaeological, historical, and linguistic investigation has produced answers to a number of significant questions about them. It is now clear that the Beothuks were a hunting and gathering people of Algonkian stock,¹ whose ancestors in Newfoundland produced tools typologically similar to the late prehistoric Indian inhabitants of coastal Labrador and the Quebec North Shore.² It is also clear that, prior to the coming of Europeans, the Beothuk occupied, or at least used, all of the island of Newfoundland with the possible exception of the Avalon peninsula east of Trinity Bay. This island, despite its enormous size, has a simplified ecosystem characterized by a disproportionately small number of prey species relative to the large number of predators. Those predators included wolves, bears, lynx, marten, mink, weasels, otter, fox, and human beings. The major native interior prey species were caribou, beaver, and arctic hare (although the bones of the latter have never been identified from an archaeological site on the island). In essence, then, the island is a rather impoverished piece of the boreal forest in the mouth of the St. Lawrence. Of course, the surrounding waters are much richer in available food. Most important of the marine mammals to native hunters were harbour, harp, grey, and hooded seals, and walruses, all of which were once found in abundance off the coasts. Other marine resources available to the Beothuks included cod, salmon, flounder, smelt, capelin, mussels, soft-shelled clams, and lobsters. A number of avian species also contributed to the aboriginal diet including the now extinct great auk as well as murres and a wide variety of ducks and geese.³

*An earlier version of this work was presented at the Seventh Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, Edinburgh, May 4-7, 1988. I am indebted to Laurel Doucette, Charles Martijn, Douglas Robbins and Jim Tuck for their comments.

- 1 John Hewson, *Beothuk Vocabularies: A Comparative Study* (St. John's, 1978), pp. 135-46. Hewson also noted that the Beothuk language "appears to show" a "feature...normally considered diagnostic" of Central rather than Eastern Algonkian (p. 146). The present-day Naskapi-Montagnais of Labrador are also classified as part of the Central Algonkian subgroup.
- 2 Ralph T. Pastore, "Excavations at Boyd's Cove — 1984: a Preliminary Report", in J.S. Thomson and C. Thomson, eds., *Archaeology in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1984* (St. John's, 1985), pp. 322-37 and R.T. Pastore, "Investigations at Boyd's Cove: The 1985 Field Season, a Preliminary Report", in J.S. and C. Thomson, eds. *Archaeology in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1985* (St. John's, 1986), pp. 218-32.
- 3 A.T. Bergerud, "Prey Switching in a Simple Ecosystem", *Scientific American*, 249 (December

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The majority of prehistoric Beothuk sites are found along stretches of coastline that allowed them to exploit the resources of both the near shore and the interior of the island. This site distribution leaves the impression of a people who were not specialized in their hunting and fishing strategies,⁴ an hypothesis strengthened by the few samples of prehistoric Beothuk food remains that have been recovered from archaeological sites.⁵ A generalized subsistence pattern was probably necessary for the island's peoples because, despite the rich resources of the sea, prehistoric human populations in Newfoundland have always been vulnerable to changes in the availability of animal stocks. One of the most significant marine resources would have been the harp seal which is usually present, even today, in herds numbering more than a million. Yet there have been times in the historic period when, due to strong offshore winds, the unsuitability of the ice, or factors not yet understood, these seals unaccountably failed to arrive off the island's coast.⁶ There is no reason to believe that prehistoric harp seal stocks would have been any more reliable. The most important land resource, caribou, may have been equally unreliable. A successful caribou hunt involved intercepting the animals primarily upon their fall migration.⁷ Caribou movements are notoriously unpredictable and may be affected by factors as diverse as insects and ice storms. As illustrated in Figure 1, Newfoundland's native peoples, like most hunting and gathering bands, had to time their own seasonal movements to coincide with the availability of their prey. If that prey was not there, hunters would have to fall back on less important substitutes. Unfortunately, the island of Newfoundland lacked many of "fall-back" species — the moose, deer, and porcupine — found on the mainland. Even less important prey species such as beaver and freshwater fish are much less abundant than on the mainland. Newfoundland native groups, therefore, had little margin for survival if one of their major food resources, caribou or harp seal, failed. A few years of such

1983), pp. 130-41; J.A. Tuck and R.T. Pastore, "A Nice Place to Visit, but...Prehistoric Human Extinctions on the Island of Newfoundland", *Canadian Journal of Archaeology*, 9 (1985), pp. 69-80.

- 4 R.T. Pastore, "The Spatial Distribution of Late Palaeo-Eskimo Sites on the Island of Newfoundland", in *Palaeo-Eskimo Cultures in Newfoundland, Labrador and Ungava* (St. John's, 1986), pp. 125-34.
- 5 David Simpson, "Prehistoric Archaeology of the Port au Port Peninsula", M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1986. Fieldwork under my direction in the summer of 1987 at a Beothuk site on an island in Notre Dame Bay revealed a prehistoric Beothuk midden made up of bones from a broad range of food species.
- 6 L. Chafe, *Chafe's Sealing Book: A History of the Newfoundland Sealfishery from the Earliest Available Records Down to and Including the Voyage of 1923* (3rd ed., St. John's, 1924), p. 19.
- 7 Arthur E. Speiss, *Reindeer and Caribou Hunters: An Archaeological Study* (New York, 1979), p. 124.

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failures might well cause the sort of extinctions that appear to be characteristic of Newfoundland's prehistory. Indeed, archaeological research has demonstrated that in at least three instances before the arrival of Europeans, prehistoric native populations have become extinct — very likely because of changes in the availability of vital food resources.⁸

Although archaeology has provided at least the outlines of the prehistoric Beothuk subsistence pattern, it is not possible to determine the size of the Beothuk population at the time of European contact. Such a determination would require a systematic survey of the entire coast and much of the interior of the island as well as a programme of excavation designed to reveal site size and population and, given the expense involved, such an undertaking is unlikely. Even the fortuitous discovery of archaeological sites is less likely in Newfoundland. Elsewhere, many archaeological sites are discovered because of modern building and road construction, but the island's poverty, sparse population, and rugged terrain make extensive activity of this sort highly improbable. In the absence of such a programme of reconnaissance and excavation, estimates of Beothuk population can only be informed guesses. Perhaps the first recorded estimate was by Joseph Banks who noted in 1766 that Beothuks were "thought to be very few as I have been told not Exceeding 500 in number but why that should be imagind I cannot tell as we Know nothing at all of the Interior Parts of the Island nor Ever had the Least Connexion with them tho the french we are told had".⁹ Although Banks believed that by the 1760s the Beothuks had retreated into the interior, there is evidence that they were still visiting the coast to hunt and fish, even if their permanent residence had shifted to the interior.¹⁰ He was, however, correct in regarding that population estimate with some scepticism, for there really was no sound basis for estimating their numbers.¹¹

Ignorance about the size of the Beothuk population at a time when the numbers of other native peoples of the northeast were quite well known to whites is not surprising. Some time after about the second decade of the 17th century, the Beothuks followed a pattern of withdrawal from contact with Europeans which culminated in their extinction early in the 19th century. The

8 Tuck and Pastore, "Extinctions".

9 A.M. Lysaght, ed., *Joseph Banks in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1766: His Diary, Manuscripts and Collections* (Berkeley, 1971), p. 132.

10 For example, see "The narrative of Lt. John Cartwright's journey up the Exploits River, 1768", in J.P. Howley, *The Beothucks or Red Indians* (Cambridge, 1915), p. 33.

11 For a discussion of the debate on Beothuk population size see Ingeborg Marshall, "An Unpublished Map Made By John Cartwright Between 1768 and 1773 Showing Beothuck Indian Settlements and Artifacts And Allowing a New Population Estimate", *Ethnohistory*, 24 (Summer 1977), pp. 223-49.

tragedy of that extinction, unique in Canadian history, has attracted a great deal of attention from both scholarly and popular writers. The Newfoundland geologist, James P. Howley, whose remarkable collection of documents pertaining to the Beothuks was published in 1915, concluded that the Beothuks had been hunted and harrassed to extinction. Although Howley discounted many of the more lurid oral accounts of Beothuk persecution, his documentary collection was eagerly used by a number of popular writers, most notably Harold Horwood and Pierre Berton, to spin out a sensational tale of "the people who were murdered for fun".¹²

Given the fact that researchers limited to the documentary record were faced with a number of accounts, some trustworthy, others not, of Europeans killing Beothuks, it is perhaps not surprising that a monocausal explanation of the Beothuk demise was accepted. That would change after the results of James Tuck's archaeological investigations of a number of Newfoundland sites were published. He found that for thousands of years prior to the coming of Europeans, Newfoundland's inhabitants had depended upon the resources of the sea for most of their food. He also noted that when Europeans began to settle the island, of necessity they were drawn to the same resource-rich areas of the coastline that the Beothuks inhabited. As Tuck put it: "An unknown number of natives were actually killed outright by Europeans. But more important to the survival or extinction of the race, the remaining Beothuks were denied access to the coast and forced to try and survive on the resources of the interior".¹³ In an important article published in 1977 Leslie Upton argued that "despite these tales of slaughter, common to all North American frontiers, the decrease in Beothuk population over a period of three hundred years was unspectacular". Positing a population of about 2,000 at the time of European contact, Upton found nothing unusual about a rate of decline due to epidemic disease and loss of hunting territory that was, in fact, less than what other researchers had found for New England. In a suggestive comparison between the Micmac and the Beothuk experience Upton speculated that "the Beothuks died because they did not have enough contacts with the whites". He noted that the course of Beothuk-white relations had been remarkably different from that of other Indian peoples in North America. Upton stated that "the Beothuk strategy of withdrawal has no parallel elsewhere in the region, and its cause cannot be known: epidemic disease may have been the catalyst that prompted the decision".¹⁴ The problem with this explanation is that

12 Harold Horwood, "The People Who Were Murdered for Fun", *MacLean's Magazine*, 10 October 1959; Pierre Berton, *My Country: The Remarkable Past* (Toronto, 1976).

13 James A. Tuck, *Newfoundland and Labrador Prehistory* (Ottawa, 1976), p. 75.

14 Leslie Upton, "The Extermination of the Beothucks of Newfoundland", *The Canadian Historical Review*, 58 (June 1977), pp. 133-53.

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every other native people in North America also suffered the ravages of epidemic disease; none, however, withdrew so determinedly from European contact.

Throughout North America, the lure that drew native peoples to European contact was trade. The knives, axes, kettles, blankets and guns of the newcomers were immensely desired by Indians. Elsewhere in North America Indians endured disease, violence, alcoholism, and an assault on their most deeply held beliefs in order to trade furs for European goods. The fact that the Beothuks did not do so is remarkable, perhaps unique. Since Upton's work, archaeologists working on Beothuk sites have done much to suggest a possible reason for the Beothuk failure to participate in a fur trade.¹⁵ In brief, it is argued that because of the unusual nature of the early Newfoundland economy, the Beothuks did not *need* to enter into a fur trade to obtain European goods — especially metal objects. Once European fishermen began to dry fish on shore, they left behind, each winter, flakes, wharves, stages and a variety of debris associated with an onshore fishery. For the Beothuks, these seasonally-abandoned fishing premises were treasure troves of metal objects, particularly nails. Archaeological work at two Beothuk sites in Notre Dame Bay, in fact, has resulted in the recovery of hundreds of nails (many of them modified into projectile points), as well as scraps of iron and brass kettles, fish hooks, awls, and numerous other metal pieces. Although a marginal trade between European fishermen and Beothuks may have existed in the 16th and early 17th centuries,¹⁶ by the latter date the Beothuks had been drawn into a pattern of pilfering European goods from seasonally-abandoned fishing premises. As a result, the first European settlers on the island had to trap their own furs. The Newfoundland “furrier”, as he was called, dates to at least 1612-1613.¹⁷ Although more research is needed, the practise of whites trapping furs in the 17th century appears to have little parallel in the rest of North America.¹⁸ When whites were forced to trap their own furs,

15 The following argument is a brief summary of the material presented in R.T. Pastore, “Fishermen, Furriers, and Beothuks: The Economy of Extinction”, *Man in the Northeast*, 33 (Spring 1987), pp. 47-62.

16 For example, in 1612 when the would-be colonizer, John Guy, encountered Beothuks in Trinity Bay, the Beothuks attempted to trade with the English by leaving behind poles with furs on them, but the English were not equipped with trade goods. As Cell noted, the Beothuks, unlike this particular group of Englishmen, appear to have engaged in a fur trade before. John Guy's Journal of a Voyage to Trinity Bay, 7 October 1612 to 25 November 1612, in Gillian Cell, ed., *Newfoundland Discovered: English Attempts at Colonization, 1610-1630* (London, 1982), p. 76.

17 “Occurrences in Newfoundland”, 1 September 1612-1 April 1613, in David B. Quinn, ed., *New American World* (New York, 1979), IV, pp. 166, 169, 170, 172-5.

18 Although the Hudson's Bay Company did allow its men to trap privately at least by the 18th century (see for example Instructions of Joseph Isbister, Chief Trader at Albany Fort to John Yarrow, Master at Eastmain House, 15 September 1753, HBCA B.59/a/22, fo 4, extract provided by Toby Morantz), Morantz believes that such trapping by whites was “was on a very small scale”.

there was, of course, even less possibility that a systematic fur trade would emerge on the island between settlers and Beothuks.

The absence of fur traders in Newfoundland was paralleled by an absence of missionaries. Elsewhere in North America, one of the more important ways in which native peoples were drawn into interaction with Europeans was through the activities of missionaries. Newfoundland's seasonal fishery and tiny year-round British population (estimated at about 1200 in the last quarter of the 17th century),¹⁹ however, could not support a missionary effort to the Beothuks. Nor is there any evidence that the colony of Placentia, occupied by the French during the period, 1662-1713, sent missionaries to the Beothuks.²⁰ The other usual medium for peaceful contact between Indians and whites in the European colonies was the official assigned by the metropolitan powers to deal with native groups. Such officials generally had two functions: to secure the assistance or the neutrality of Indians, and to negotiate the sale of Indian land. But the British Crown did not make the commanders of the Newfoundland convoy governors nor did it provide for the creation of magistrates who would spend the winter on the island until 1724.²¹ By then there was certainly no need for Indian agents since the Beothuk pattern of withdrawal was well established. Nor was there any need to secure the assistance of the Beothuks in the wars between Britain and France. As a people who lacked firearms, they would have counted for very little and, in any case, the contest for supremacy in Newfoundland would be won by the power which had naval, not land, supremacy.

Without these Indian agents, fur traders, and missionaries, there was no one to stand between the Beothuks and the white settlers, their competitors for the resources of the coast.²² Because the vast majority of those European occupiers left no written records, the historian of the Beothuk experience is forced to rely much more than usual upon archaeological data even for information as basic as the plotting of the Beothuk retreat from encroaching white settlement. In an attempt to delineate the shrinking world of the Beothuks, evidence from published and unpublished archaeological reports, site record forms on file in the Newfoundland Museum in St. John's, and a few scattered documentary references, have been used to note the location of both prehistoric and historic Beothuk sites in Newfoundland and related sites in Labrador and Quebec.²³

19 Grant Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland* (Toronto, 1976), p. 82.

20 See Ministère de la France d'Outre-Mer, Archives des Colonies, Serie C11C, Amérique du Nord, vols. 1-7, Terre-Neuve (Plaisance), Microfilm in the PAC.

21 Keith Matthews, *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland, 1500-1830* (St. John's, 1973), pp. 141-50.

22 Upton, "The Extermination of the Beothuks", p. 153.

23 Earlier results of this research were published in Graeme Wynn, Ralph Pastore, and Bernard Hoffman, "The Atlantic Realm" in R. Cole Harris, ed., *Historical Atlas of Canada*, I (Toronto,

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The question of what constitutes prehistoric Beothuk needs some explanation. It now is clear that the immediate prehistoric predecessors of the Beothuk on the island of Newfoundland were the possessors of the Little Passage complex. At two important sites in Notre Dame Bay, for example, there was no evidence of another occupation intervening between that of the Little Passage people and the Beothuks.²⁴ In addition, the strong resemblance between the stone tools used by both groups suggested a continuity over time. That hypothesis has been strengthened by a detailed attribute analysis of Beothuk and Little Passage stone projectile points which identified a number of trends in attributes extending from the prehistoric period to perhaps the beginning of the 18th century.²⁵

On the other side of the Strait of Belle Isle, William Fitzhugh first identified a late prehistoric/early historic Indian presence extending along the coast of Labrador from Saglek Bay to the Quebec Lower North Shore, which he named the Point Revenge complex. "The geographic extent of Point Revenge occupation and its persistence into the historic period", he argued, "make it the most likely progenitor of the modern Indians of Labrador". He also noted that "sites related to Point Revenge in Newfoundland are thought to be ancestral to Beothuk culture, and on the Quebec north shore, prehistoric continuity into historic Montagnais is also suggested".²⁶ The posited relationship between Little Passage and Point Revenge is based both on a similarity of projectile point styles and an apparent preference in both cases for locating sites in similar areas. Little Passage and Point Revenge sites are often found in an inner coastal zone which suggests a subsistence pattern described by Fitzhugh as "Modified-Interior", *i.e.*, a "generalized" rather than "specialized" dependency on coastal and interior resources.²⁷

Although more research on both Little Passage and Point Revenge is needed, current evidence does suggest a relationship. Figure 2 is predicated on this premise and indicates 16 Point Revenge sites on the central Labrador coast, two

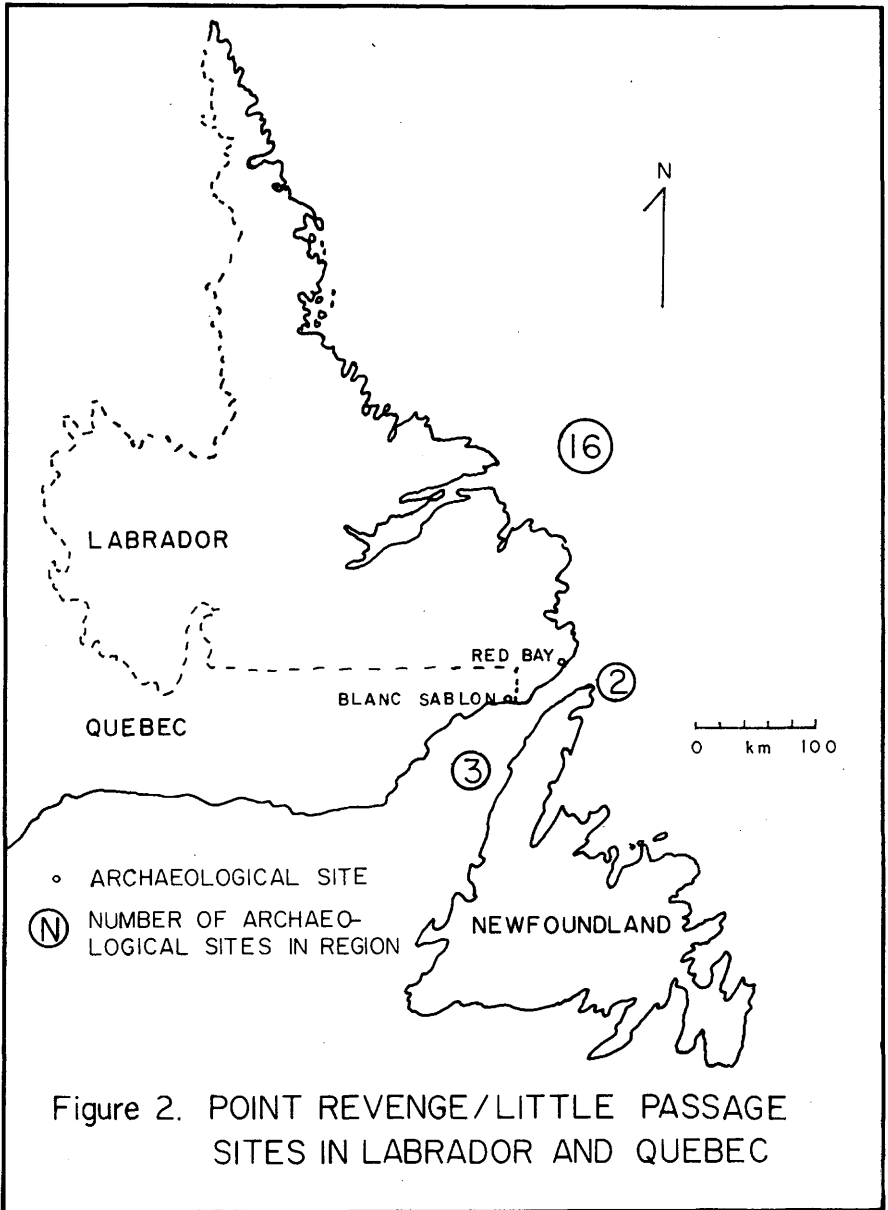
1987). Results of archaeological research undertaken since the preparation of that volume have been incorporated in this work.

24 Ralph Pastore, "Excavations at Boyd's Cove, Notre Dame Bay — 1983", in J.S. Thomson and C. Thomson, eds., *Archaeology in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1983* (St. John's, 1984), pp. 98-125; Ralph Pastore, "Excavations at Inspector Island, 1987: A Preliminary Report", in *Archaeology in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1987* (in press).

25 Fred Schwarz, "The Little Passage Complex in Newfoundland: A Comparative Study of Assemblages", Honours thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1984.

26 William W. Fitzhugh, "Indian and Eskimo/Inuit Settlement History in Labrador: An Archaeological View", in Carol Brice-Bennett, ed., *Our Footprints are Everywhere: Inuit Land Use and Occupancy in Labrador* (Nain, Newfoundland, 1977), p. 14.

27 Schwarz, "The Little Passage Complex", pp. 43-7.



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Little Passage sites in the Strait of Belle Isle, and three Little Passage or Point Revenge sites on Quebec Lower North Shore.²⁸ At present, James Tuck, the excavator of the Red Bay site, believes that the diagnostic artifacts of the two sites in the Strait of Belle Isle would fit generally within the assemblages recovered from prehistoric Beothuk (Little Passage) sites on the island. This should not be surprising. The much earlier Maritime Archaic and Palaeo-Eskimo traditions have been reported from both Quebec-Labrador and the island,²⁹ and it would be unusual if the Beothuks and neighboring Quebec-Labrador groups were an exception to the general rule that related subarctic hunter-gatherer cultures tend to be scattered over quite wide distances. Still, there are locations within these huge areas which were quite crucial for hunter-gatherers, and the Strait of Belle Isle would have been exactly such a place. It has quite rightly been referred to as a “resource funnel” for a variety of marine resources including many species of whales and seals.³⁰

On the island itself, as Figure 3 reveals, six prehistoric sites have been discovered in Bonavista Bay, five in Notre Dame Bay, five on the south coast, two each in the interior and Trinity Bay, and one each in Placentia Bay and on the west. One explanation for the preponderance of sites in the island’s northeast is illustrated by Figure 4 which shows the migration of harp seals and their breeding areas.³¹ Clearly, Notre Dame Bay would have been very appealing to prehistoric Beothuk seal hunters. The attraction of the south coast is more difficult to explain, but since this coast tends to be ice-free all year long,³² its coves and bays

28 At present there is some confusion in the usage of the terms “Point Revenge” and “Little Passage”. While Fitzhugh designates Indian occupations on the coast of central Labrador from about A.D. 1000 to A.D. 1650, as Point Revenge, the excavators of the Quebec sites perceive Point Revenge as antecedent to Little Passage. Until the results of recent research on both sides of the Quebec Labrador border appear, I have chosen not to attempt to reconcile the terminology, but simply to present the data as reported. William W. Fitzhugh, “Winter Cove 4 and the Point Revenge Occupation of the Central Labrador Coast”, *Arctic Anthropology*, XV, 2 (1978), pp. 146-74; Hélène Taillon and Georges Barré, eds., *Datations au ¹⁴C des sites archéologiques du Québec* (Quebec City, 1987), pp. 480-1.

29 James A. Tuck, “Prehistoric Archaeology in Atlantic Canada since 1975”, *Canadian Journal of Archaeology*, 6 (1982), p. 203.

30 F.A. Aldrich, “The Resource funnel of the Strait of Belle Isle”, paper delivered to the International Symposium on Early European Settlement and Exploitation in Atlantic Canada, St. John’s, October 1979.

31 Based on A.W. Mansfield, *Seals of Arctic and Eastern Canada* (Ottawa, 1964), p.12, and D.E. Segeant, “Migrations of harp Seals *Pagophilus groenlandicus* (Erleben) in the Northwest Atlantic”, *Journal of the Fisheries Research Board of Canada*, 22 (1965), pp. 433-64.

32 Chesley Sanger, “The Evolution of Sealing and the Spread of Permanent Settlement in Northeastern Newfoundland”, in J.J. Mannion, ed., *The Peopling of Newfoundland* (St. John’s, 1977), p.139.

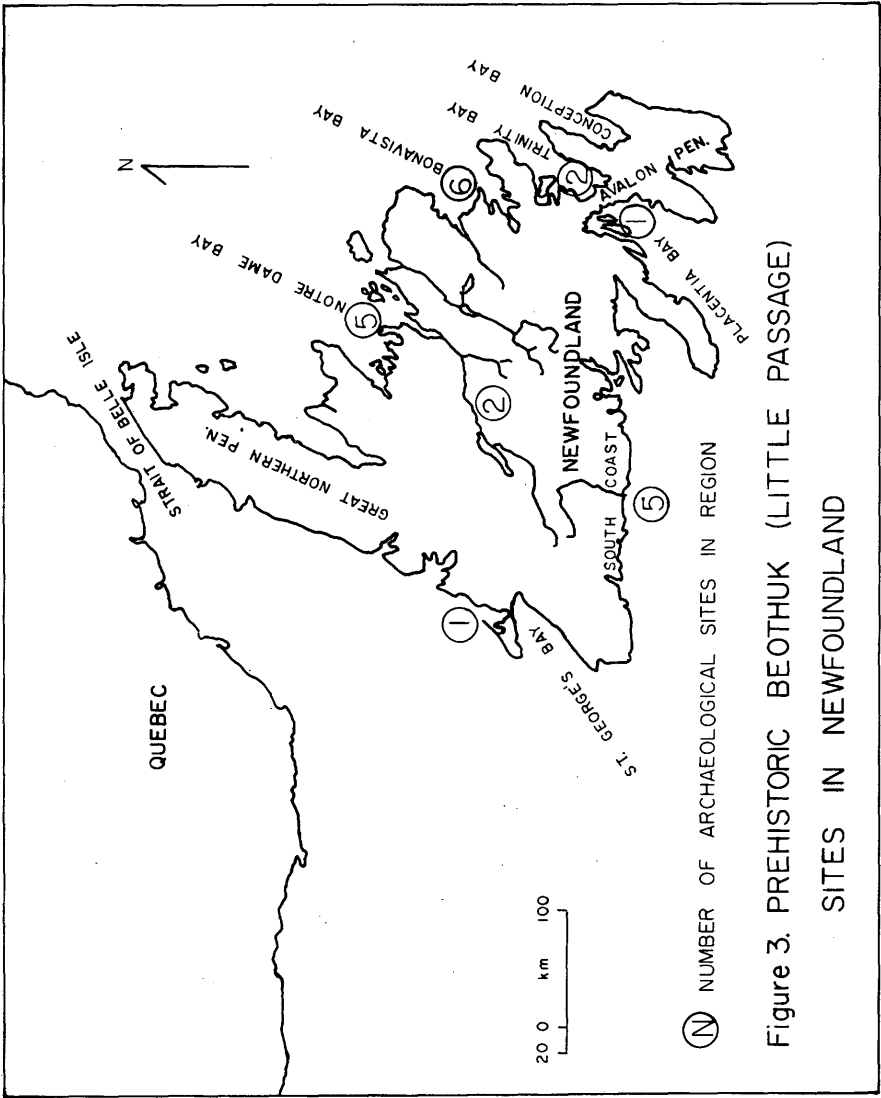
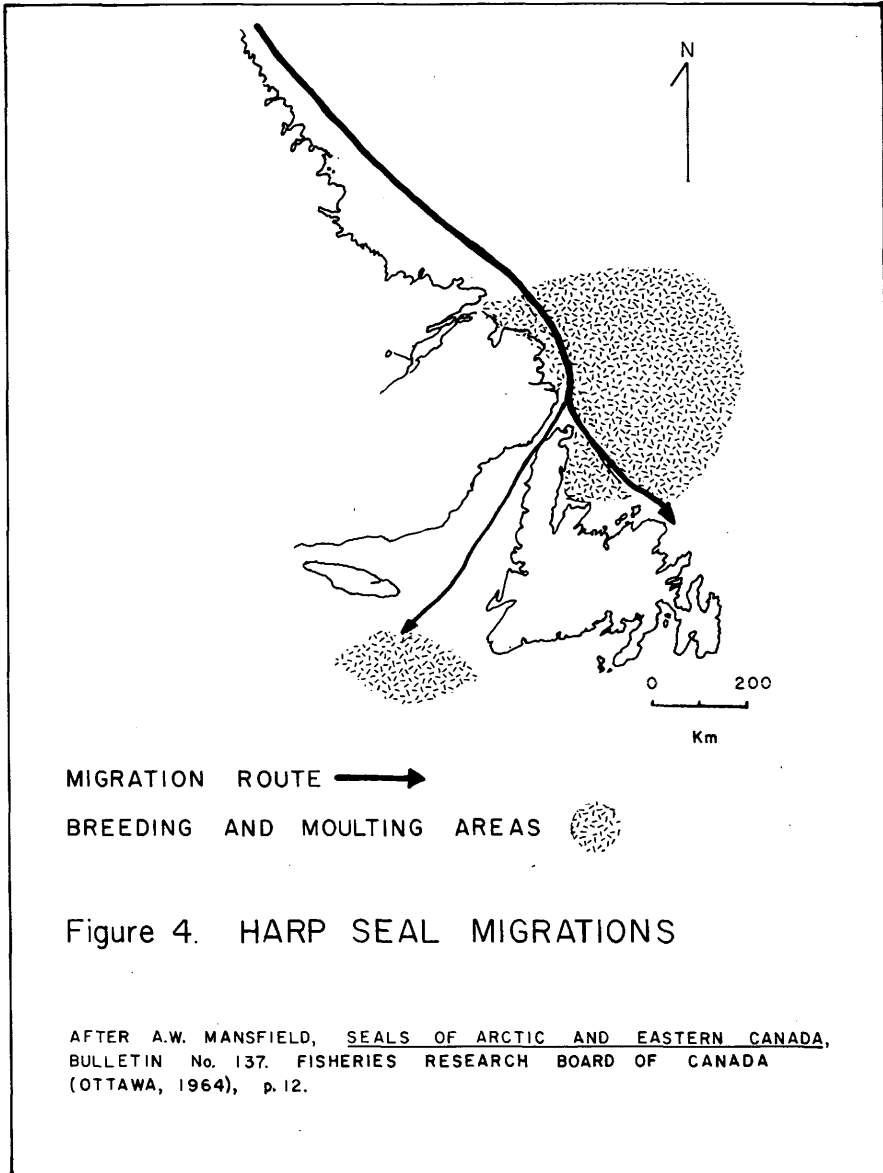


Figure 3. PREHISTORIC BEOTHUK (LITTLE PASSAGE) SITES IN NEWFOUNDLAND



once had harbour and grey seals in abundance.³³ In addition, prehistoric hunters may well have been drawn to the south coast to hunt caribou in the winter since the largest winter concentrations of caribou on the island are to be found along the south coast and its interior.³⁴

Figure 5 reveals a somewhat different pattern in the distribution of historic sites.³⁵ That pattern would be much clearer if it were possible to establish an age for each site, but in many instances the surviving material is simply not datable. The sites at both extremes of Figure 5 may be among the oldest. In the far southeast, the Ferryland site is also the location of Lord Baltimore's colony, founded in 1621, and evidence of an Indian presence here lies beneath a stone wall attributed to Baltimore and is found with European artifacts which date to the late 16th century. In the far northwest, material from Blanc Sablon in the Strait of Belle Isle is still undergoing analysis, but according to its most recent excavator, aboriginally produced stone tools have been found at the same level with European artifacts.³⁶ Preliminary work from the nearby site of Red Bay, a Basque whaling station occupied from ca. 1540 to ca. 1610, indicates an association of 16th century Basque features with an Indian occupation. The stone projectile points produced by those Indians, both at Blanc Sablon and Red Bay, may in fact be a variant of those produced by historic Beothuks on the island. The island itself is clearly visible from the Labrador side of the narrow (20 km) Strait of Belle Isle, and it is inconceivable that native groups on either side would have been prevented from traversing it throughout the year. Indeed, for much of the year travel by canoe across the Strait would be far easier than an inland journey of 20 km by foot. The Strait of Belle Isle, in fact, should be viewed as a highway, not a barrier.³⁷

Whatever the nature of the relationship between the historic Indians of Quebec-Labrador and those of the island, it is clear that both groups had access

33 Even now there are major concentrations of harbour seals found from Placentia Bay to the southwest corner of the island. J. Boulva and I.A. McLaren, "Biology of the Harbor Seal, *Phoca vitulina*, in Eastern Canada", Department of Fisheries and Oceans Bulletin, No. 200 (Ottawa, 1979), p. 2.

34 During the period 1957 to 1967, the largest concentration of caribou was found along the south coast and its interior. A.T. Bergerud, "The Population Dynamics of the Newfoundland Caribou", Wildlife Society, Wildlife Monograph No. 25 (Washington, D.C., 1971). Whether this was true in the prehistoric period is not known.

35 These sites include: archaeological sites, both living and burial; burials reported by non-professionals; and living sites, burials, and storehouses reported by contemporary observers. Documentary and other references for these sites are to be found in the appendices at the end of the paper.

36 Jean-Yves Pintal, personal communication.

37 I am indebted to Marguerite MacKenzie, Memorial University Department of Linguistics, for this observation.

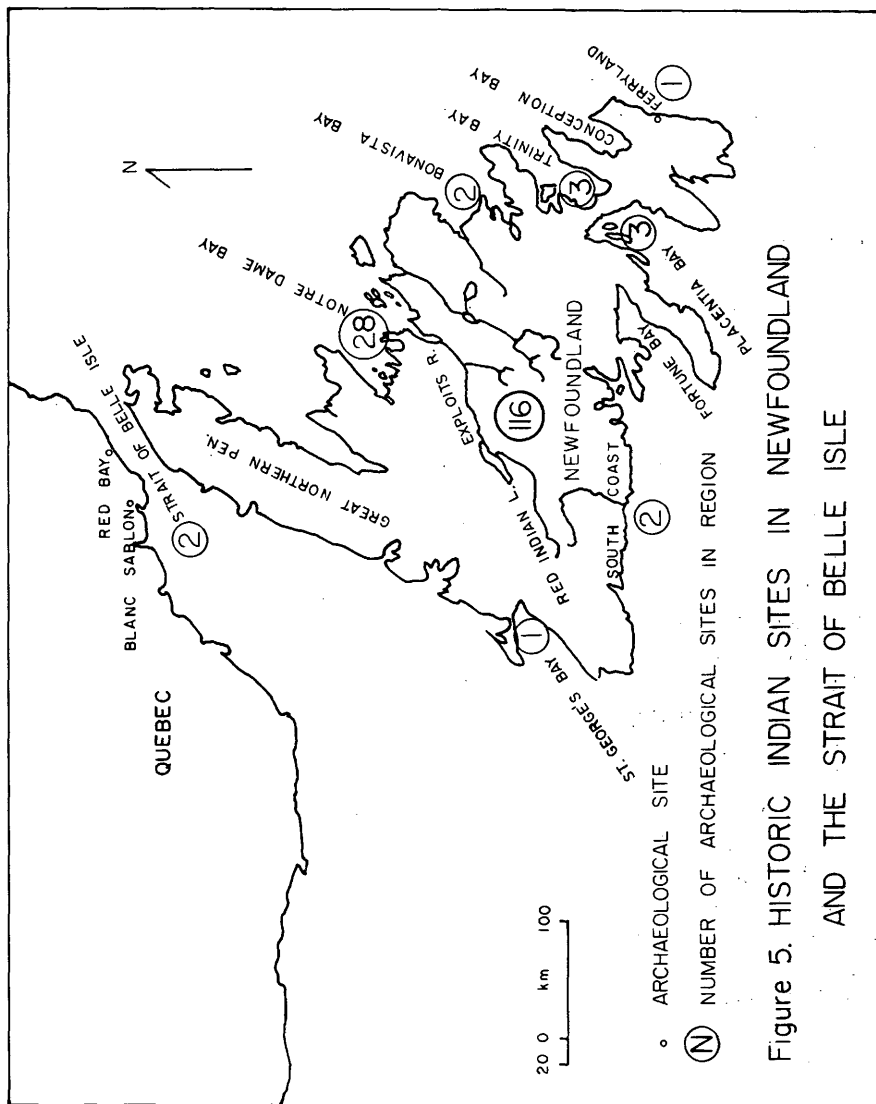


Figure 5. HISTORIC INDIAN SITES IN NEWFOUNDLAND AND THE STRAIT OF BELLE ISLE

to European goods in a similar manner. That access is clearly indicated by the presence of native hearths found at both Red Bay and Ferryland which are located in and among European structures. This has led the director of excavations at those sites to suggest that the Indians in question had been visiting the two locations to scavenge European iron from seasonally-abandoned shore stations. The one site from the southwest corner of the island, in St. George's Bay, was reported in 1594 by the master of the *Grace* of Bristol who found a Beothuk camp in that bay, along with the wrecks of two Basque ships. The other sites along the South Coast and Placentia Bay are either burials or archaeological sites, none of which can be dated with any confidence. The three sites from Trinity Bay are drawn from the account of John Guy who met a Beothuk group camped there in 1612, and from a work by an early Newfoundland entrepreneur who reported an encounter between Beothuks and European mariners around the turn of the 17th century. Only two sites are listed for Bonavista Bay, perhaps because of a lack of archaeological surveys in the area. Of these two, one is a burial, the other a living site. Unfortunately, neither has been dated with any precision.

The 28 sites in Notre Dame Bay and all but one of the 116 sites from the interior represent the Beothuk response to increased European utilization of Newfoundland. Most of these living sites date to the late 18th-early 19th centuries when the Beothuk presence in the bay was restricted to furtive fishing and hunting forays carried out under the guns of white settlers. Two of these sites, Boyd's Cove and Inspector Island, however, have been dated to ca. 1650-1730, and merit special attention.³⁸ They are situated in eastern Notre Dame Bay and were occupied at a time when English permanent settlement ended in Bonavista Bay, and a French migratory fishery was carried on in the western portion of the bay. These two living sites were positioned in an area safely between the two zones of European exploitation from which it was possible to visit the seasonally abandoned French fishery to the west for European iron, and occasionally to steal from the English settlements and fisheries to the southeast.³⁹ These sites may well have been occupied at a time when Beothuk culture entered a period of florescence — when it was still possible to hunt and fish in safety, and still possible to acquire the iron from which to fashion the tremendously useful metal cutting and piercing tools that made their lives so much easier. Faunal analysis of the animal remains from the Boyd's Cove site bears this out. The wide range of species taken prompted the

38 Pastore, "Fishermen, Furriers, and Beothuks" and "Excavations at Inspector Island, 1987". The Beothuk component at Inspector Island appears to date to ca. 1720-1730, although future analysis may result in modification of this conclusion.

39 Pastore, "Fishermen, Furriers, and Beothuks".

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analyst, Stephen Cumbaa, to note: "At Boyd's Cove we have a glimpse of a people at ease in their environment and obviously exercising a fair degree of control over use of its resources. The contrasting picture we have a century later of a beleaguered and dwindling population eking out a living on the run from a dominant culture is all the sadder for the comparison".⁴⁰ The other sites in Notre Dame Bay represent archaeological sites, both living and burial, and bone ornament caches. None has been dated with any more accuracy other than to the historic period.

The sites clustered along the Red Indian Lake-Exploits River system represent the last refuges of the Beothuk. Many of these sites have been excavated, and they have produced a large quantity of knives, scissors, trap parts, and other European objects.⁴¹ The abundance of European objects, coupled with the relative lack of stone tools, as well as the dates assigned to a number of artifacts from the Wigwam Brook site, support the evidence from the documentary record that this region was intensively occupied during the late 18th and early 19th centuries.⁴² This was a period when the Beothuks were hindered by white settlement from access to the resources of the coast and were forced to try to subsist on the meagre resources of Newfoundland's interior. The nature of those last days is graphically revealed in the archaeological evidence. Animal bones from one late 18th/early 19th century site on the Exploits River, for example, revealed that not only were the Beothuks subsisting almost entirely upon caribou, but they were attempting to do so all year round.⁴³ One leading authority on caribou hunting has noted that in an area such as Newfoundland, where caribou migrate over short distances, it would have been possible for aboriginal groups to prey on caribou year-round, but "humans usually found easier resources to harvest for part of the year, mostly anadromaous fish, beaver, or moose".⁴⁴ Moose, of course, were not introduced to the island until the late

40 Stephen Cumbaa, " 'Diverse Fures and Deeres Flesh' — Animal Use by a 17th Century Beothuk Population at Boyd's Cove, Notre Dame Bay, Newfoundland" (unpublished report, Zooarchaeological Identification Centre, National Museum of Natural Sciences, National Museums, Canada, 1984).

41 Don Locke, *Beothuk Artifacts* (Grand Falls, Newfoundland., n.d.); Helen Devereaux, "The Pope's Point Site", unpublished report, Newfoundland Museum, 1965; Helen Devereaux, "A Preliminary Report on the Indian Point Site, A Stratified Beothuk Site", unpublished report, Newfoundland Museum, 1970; Raymond LeBlanc, "The Wigwam Brook Site and the Historic Beothuk Indians", M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1973.

42 Ingeborg Marshall, "An Unpublished Map", pp. 223-49; Maps of the Red Indian Lake-Exploits River region drawn by Shanawdithit in 1829, in Howley, *The Beothucks*, pp. 238-45.

43 Frances L. Stewart, "Faunal Analysis of the Wigwam Brook Site, Newfoundland", Appendix 1, in LeBlanc, "The Wigwam Brook Site".

44 Speiss, *Reindeer and Caribou Hunters*, p. 138.

19th century, and the island's fish and beaver populations are both much smaller than those on the mainland.⁴⁵ Conventional anthropological thinking has it that caribou "can theoretically supply all of the requirements of a human population, but the chances of this occurring are in fact extremely small".⁴⁶ In fact, Newfoundland's stark interior supported only 14 indigenous mammalian species, and there is no evidence in the archaeological record that any aboriginal culture lived there for 12 months of the year. When the Beothuks were forced to do so, the results were tragic. Detailed analysis of a child's garments from a contemporaneous burial provides a graphic picture of Beothuk life during those last days. The shroud of one child (now in the Newfoundland Museum) was found to be a woman's legging, made from five pieces of skin, most of which had been patched and repaired. The child's moccasins exhibited similar careful patching and repairing; most surprising was the use of spruce root rather than the usual caribou sinew to repair the moccasins. All of this suggests a people on the ragged edge of desperation who did not even have enough animal skins to clothe a child properly.⁴⁷

This pattern of gradual Beothuk withdrawal from a territory which once encompassed almost all of Newfoundland and perhaps the Strait of Belle Isle to the banks of the Exploits River has been constructed largely on the basis of archaeological evidence. However, the same pattern is evident in the documentary record. For example, as late as 1612 John Guy noted the presence of Beothuks on the Avalon peninsula. Ten years later, the experienced sea captain Richard Whitbourne stated that although Beothuks from Bonavista Bay stole into Trinity Bay to pilfer "Hatchets, Hookes, Kniues, and such like" he implied that they no longer lived in Trinity Bay.⁴⁸

The Beothuks who had once lived in Trinity Bay appear to have travelled back and forth across the narrow isthmus of the Avalon peninsula to gain access to the considerable resources of Placentia Bay, especially the harbour seals.⁴⁹ The

45 W.B. Scott, and E.J. Crossman, *Fishes Occurring in the Fresh Waters of Insular Newfoundland* (Ottawa, 1964); Thomas Northcott, "An Investigation of the Factors Affecting Carrying Capacity of Selected Areas in Newfoundland for the Beaver (*Castor canadensis caector* Bangs 1913)", M.Sc. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1964, p. 117.

46 Ernest S. Burch, "The Caribou-Wild Reindeer as a human resource", *American Antiquity*, 37 (1972), p. 363, quoted in Speiss, *Reindeer and Caribou Hunters*, p. 139.

47 Ruth Holmes Whitehead, "I Have Lived Here Since the World Began: Atlantic Coast Traditions" in Julia D. Harrison, ed., *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples* (Toronto, 1987), p. 40.

48 Richard Whitbourne, *A Discourse and Discovery in New Found-land* (London, 1622), in Gillian Cell, ed., *Newfoundland Discovered* (London, 1982), p. 118.

49 Guy, "Journal", p. 72. Boulva and McLaren "Biology of the Harbour Seal", p. 2, found the largest concentration of harbour seals on the island in Placentia Bay.

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Beothuks may have also occupied that narrow neck of land in order to intercept caribou herds passing from the main part of the island to the isthmus.⁵⁰ The importance of that isthmus to the Beothuks is underscored by the presence of two large prehistoric Beothuk sites there. Thus, the year-round occupation of Trinity Bay by the English by 1675 and the French occupation of Placentia Bay by at least 1662 had the effect of denying these two important food sources to the Beothuk.⁵¹ By 1694, de Brouillan, the commandant of the French garrison of Placentia, could write about “la decouverte des sauvages qui habitent au sud de l’isle”, clearly indicating that the French at Placentia had not been in contact with the Beothuks, if indeed they ever had, for some time.⁵² De Brouillan’s information was given to him by a band of Micmacs who had come to Newfoundland from Cape Breton. Their arrival in Newfoundland meant yet another competitor for the island’s resources. While it is possible that there were Micmacs in Newfoundland in the 16th century,⁵³ given the report by de Brouillan, it does not appear as if their presence on the south coast was intensive enough to disrupt Beothuk use of that portion of the island. However, it is clear that by the middle of the 18th century, Micmac use of the southern portion of the island from St. George’s Bay to Placentia Bay had denied yet another area of the island — and its caribou and seals — to its aboriginal inhabitants.⁵⁴

50 The narrow necks of peninsulas are ideal for intercepting caribou migrations. M.A.P. Renouf, “Prehistoric Coastal Economy in Varangerfjord, North Norway”, Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University, 1981.

51 Gordon Hancock, “English Migration to Newfoundland”, in Mannion, ed., *The Peopling of Newfoundland*, pp. 16-7; Jean Pierre Proulx, *The Military History of Placentia* (Ottawa, 1979), pp. 9-12.

52 Jacques-François de Mombeton de Brouillan to the Minister of Marine, 25 October 1694, Archives des Colonies, C11C, II, 20.

53 The evidence for this is summarized in Charles A. Martijn, “Voyages des Micmacs dans la vallée du Saint-Laurent, sur la Côte-Nord et à Terre-Neuve”, in Charles Martijn, ed., *Les Micmacs et la Mer* (Quebec, 1986), pp. 215-21.

54 Ralph T. Pastore, *The Newfoundland Micmacs*, Newfoundland Historical Society Pamphlet No. 5 (St. John’s, 1978), pp. 9-19. While the present article was undergoing editorial review, Ingeborg Marshall’s “Beothuk and Micmac: Re-examining Relationships”, *Acadiensis*, XVII, 1 (Autumn 1988), pp. 52-82, appeared. While I would agree with Ms Marshall that the Micmacs played a greater role in the extinction of the Beothuks than has been previously recognized, I have argued that this was because of Micmac displacement of the Beothuks from an area necessary to their subsistence. Until some direct evidence is produced, I remain unconvinced that the French paid a bounty to the Micmacs for Beothuk heads. I find even more dubious Marshall’s uncritical use of an oral account of an alleged “critical turning point” when a group of Beothuks discovered a number of Micmacs with the heads of Beothuks for which they expected a reward from the French. The Beothuks supposedly then invited the offending Micmacs to a feast and slaughtered the erstwhile murderers. This is in fact a variant of a European folk motif, Motif K811.1 “Enemies invited to a feast and killed”, in Stith Thompson, ed., *Motif Index of Folk Literature*

By the middle of the 18th century, then, the Beothuk range had shrunk considerably. The contraction of the Beothuk world would have meant more than just reduced access to food resources. Given the presence in a number of prehistoric Beothuk sites on the island of Ramah chert, a translucent silicate found only in Ramah Bay in northern Labrador, it can be assumed that a trade across the Strait of Belle Isle existed in prehistoric times. Since trade between band level societies also implies the exchange of marriage partners, it is possible that at the point in Beothuk history when contact with Indian peoples in Labrador was either lost or reduced, the subsequent reduced gene pool would have further imperiled the survival of the island's natives.

It is difficult to determine when contact with Labrador may have been interrupted. There is some evidence that the Basques who carried on a whale hunt in the Strait of Belle Isle, during the period ca. 1540 to ca. 1610, employed native people at the shore stations.⁵⁵ Although there is some controversy — and no direct evidence — relating to the incidence of European epidemic disease among the native peoples of the Northeast in the 16th century,⁵⁶ there are two factors about this Basque-native contact which might have made the transmission of epidemic disease more likely. First, the distance from Europe to the Strait of Belle Isle was shorter than that to New England or the Maritimes, thus increasing the likelihood that a disease carried by a crew member would not yet have run its course prior to landing. Second, if the Basques employed Indians in shore-based activities throughout the season, the prolonged close contact implied would have been more conducive to the spread of pathogens than would be the case in a fur trade where contacts between the two groups would have been of much shorter duration.

Assuming that the Indians of the Strait of Belle Isle survived the Basque whale fishery of the 16th century, they would have had to face an invasion of the Strait by Inuit in the 17th century. There is evidence that by the last half of the 17th century there was an Inuit population living in the region throughout the year,⁵⁷

(rev. ed., Bloomington, 1955), IV, p. 340. I also find puzzling the use of a term such as "nations" to describe the Micmac and the Beothuk, and a sentence such as: "The Beothuks were evidently not in a position to enforce their claim on this territory and may have relinquished the land voluntarily in order to remain on good terms with their Micmac neighbors". Such terminology is inappropriate when dealing with hunting bands.

55 Selma Barkham, "A note on the Strait of Belle Isle during the period of Basque contact with Indians and Inuit", *Etudes/ Inuit/ Studies*, 4, 1-2 (1980), pp. 51-8.

56 Dean Snow and Kim Lanphear, "European Contact and Indian Depopulation in the Northeast: The Timing of the first Epidemics", *Ethnohistory*, 35 (Winter 1988), pp. 15-33; Bruce Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers* (Montreal, 1985), pp. 237-9.

57 Charles Martijn, "La présence inuit sur la Côte-Nord du Golfe St-Laurent à l'époque historique", *Etudes/ Inuit/ Studies*, 4, 1-2 (1980), pp. 105-25.

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and it is quite likely that Indian use of the Strait was either severely curtailed or ended. In 1705 Augustin LeGardeur de Courtemanche established a trading post at Brador, near Blanc Sablon, and it is significant that he had to bring a group of Montagnais families with him to hunt fur bearers and to prosecute a (salmon ?) fishery.⁵⁸ The well-documented hostility between the Inuit and French traders and fishermen in the Strait of Belle Isle casts further doubt on the likelihood that normal communication between the Indian populations of the Island and Labrador could have persisted in the last half of the 17th and first half of the 18th century.⁵⁹ Those French posts were established to trade with the Montagnais whose persistence today underscores the hypothesis that it was the Beothuk decision to withdraw from the fur trade which was the most important factor in their demise. The effects of that decision, however, were reinforced by the growing exploitation of Newfoundland's resources by other ethnic groups. Although the spread of permanent English settlement on the island may have been the most important factor denying the Beothuks access to vitally needed coastal resources, to that equation must now be added the Basque and Inuit presence in the Strait of Belle Isle, the Micmac use of the southern third of the island, and the French base at Placentia. A complete understanding of all of the effects of these arrivals upon the Beothuks may not yet be attainable, but the pattern revealed by the distribution of Beothuk sites over time is clear enough. As contact with Labrador was lost, and as the various regions of the island were denied to the Beothuks, they were forced to withdraw to the island's impoverished interior where there could be but one outcome for them.

58 "Anonymous Memoir, 1715, Concerning Labrador", No. 1419, in Privy Council, *In the Matter of the Boundary Dispute Between the Dominion of Canada and the Colony of Newfoundland in the Labrador Peninsular* (Ottawa, 1927), VII, p. 3694.

59 François Trudel, "Les relations entre les Français et les Inuit au Labrador méridional, 1660-1760", *Etudes/Inuit/Studies*, 4, 1-2 (1980), pp. 135-46.