

## Methodists and Beothuk: Research in Methodist Archives

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# Methodists and Beothuk: Research in Methodist Archives

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OVER THE LAST TWO DECADES the life and demise of the Newfoundland Beothuk has become a popular research topic.<sup>1</sup> The imagination of many was kindled by the fact that this Indian group is no longer existent and that many aspects of their history and culture are shrouded in mystery. The former has encouraged the production of poetic visions and personal interpretations, the latter a search for new evidence.

Many years ago I embarked on a long-term project of assembling information relating to the Beothuk and searching for new sources in the field, in archives and in museum collections, this material to be interpreted and assembled into a comprehensive study of the Newfoundland Beothuk.

Research in archives has proven to be a lengthy and arduous occupation. Many major collections have been examined but only small items have been found: these needed interpretation and piecing together. The Wesleyan Methodist archives might not seem a promising place to look for clues about the Beothuk but since the search was to be systematic, their turn eventually came round. No major manuscript was found in these archives but several reports and unpublished letters contain descriptions of captives, stories of persecutions, or reflections on this native group. The Wesleyan Missionary Committee in England was concerned enough about the Beothuk to send one of their preachers in search of them. This action and the policy decision behind it set the Methodists apart from other religious groups which, until the decline of the Beothuk, had representatives in Newfoundland.

These documents add little if any new ethnic or historic information on the Beothuk. They are nevertheless interesting since they corroborate information from other sources and add to our understanding of attitudes

towards the Beothuk and of the level of the Methodists' involvement on their behalf.

The desire and duty to convert the Newfoundland Indians to Christianity was one of the arguments produced in favour of creating permanent settlements on the island (Quinn 4:536). Indeed, the instructions to governors of new colonies had generally stressed the need to bring salvation to the "barbarous infidels." However, the British Government seems to have neglected the natives when it issued Royal Charters to companies which sponsored settlements. In 1610 when the first Newfoundland colony was founded, the seasonal fishermen had already pressured the Beothuk out of their coastal habitat in the southern parts and once the Indians were out of sight, their conversion to Christianity was not considered important.

French colonists were often accompanied by Roman Catholic missionaries, mainly from the Jesuit and Recollect orders, whose task it was to christen and convert native populations. The Church of England did not have an equivalent institutional arm. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (S.P.G.), which was to take on this missionary function, was not founded until nearly a century after colonization had begun. When its first minister, the Rev. John Jackson, arrived in St. John's in 1701 (Thompson 118) the European population was as much in need of Christian guidance and worship as were the "savages," and the Beothuk, who generally avoided contact, were disregarded.

In comparison with the long presence of the S.P.G. in Newfoundland the Methodists were latecomers to this country. Their first minister, the Rev. Laurence Coughlan, worked in Conception Bay between 1765 and 1773. Having been appointed by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, he avoided the persecutions which later Methodists were subject to: for instance, John Hoskins, a lay Methodist preacher in Old Perlican, was tarred and threatened with death by sailors in Trinity Harbour in 1780 (Hoskins 143). Until the end of the eighteenth century the Methodist societies and services were largely led by lay people, though in the 1780s and 1790s a few ordained ministers were sent out from England. They served in Conception, Trinity and Bonavista Bays, but since their work was as arduous as it was disappointing, the individuals did not stay long. Among many problems jealousies and competition from other religious groups made life for the Methodists a struggle. This, one would think, would not have encouraged them to expand their work to the Beothuk. Yet in 1809, under the leadership of Dr. Thomas Coke, the Wesleyan Missionary Committee in England decided to take measures to spread the gospel to the aborigines. They in-

structed John Remmington, who was working at the time in Trinity, to go northward in search of the Newfoundland Indians. This policy was unique among the religious groups in Newfoundland and though Remmington's attempt to meet the Beothuk may have been hopeless and impracticable, it was a token of genuine concern for the Beothuks' salvation, for which the Methodists deserve full credit.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Beothuk lived largely in seclusion: in fall they assembled along the Exploits River and at Red Indian Lake to hunt and trap caribou; during the summer season they mostly resorted to sequestered places on the coast and islands between Cape John and Cape Freels, Bonavista Bay (Howley 89). The Beothuk were, by now, irreconcilably hostile to the Europeans and to approach them without caution was foolhardy. In the event it is unlikely that Remmington could have found their campsites since he was not acquainted with the lay of the land and would not have had the means to hire a guide, a boat and other equipment necessary for such a venture. Neither would the help of volunteers have been forthcoming. Five years earlier William Cull, who was asked by the government to return a captured Beothuk to her tribe, wrote that he was unable to find men to accompany him, because the people of Fogo "do not hold with civilizing the Indians" (Howley 64).

Before Remmington set out, his intention had come to the notice of the Rev. John Clinch of Trinity, who said in a letter to the S.P.G. in London that Remmington, "a Methodist Preacher," had recently arrived in that community. He had been "sent by Dr. Coke to inform himself respecting an Indian town situated about nine miles from Bonavista. It appears that government at home had spoken to Dr. Coke to send a missionary to convert them to Christianity." Clinch conjectures that the whole matter was based on a misunderstanding since no Indian settlement ever existed in that part of the island (Clinch, letter). In this Clinch was mistaken. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Bonavista Bay had been a favourite habitat of the Beothuk to which they regularly resorted during the summer season (Cell 118; CO 194/7: 7). Although in the early 1800s they no longer came into the bay, the Beothuk still visited the islands off the headlands to the north and, at the time of Clinch's letter, an encampment of twelve wigwams allegedly was discovered in the neighbourhood of Cat Harbour, now North Lumsden (Tocque 286).

The full story of Remmington's search for the Indians may never be known, since he seems not to have submitted a detailed report. A communication to the Wesleyan Committee signed by him and two other

preachers and printed in the *Methodist Magazine* in 1810 includes the comment: "I have attended to your request and have gone to Bonavista and although I could not find any Indians there, I found people prepared for the Gospel. . . ." (86). In a letter written in August of the same year, Remington alludes to the weariness, painfulness and great perils of journeying through the wilderness of the island, which could have been a reference to his fruitless search for the natives. Smith, who may have had access to documents which are no longer available, comments of this episode in his *History of the Methodist Church*, "through lack of preparation for a difficult and dangerous task [he] had failed to find any representatives of a rapidly vanishing race" (2:44).

After Remington had returned to England, the two remaining Methodist preachers, William Ellis and Samuel McDowell, gave their opinion in a letter from Carbonear: "With regard to the Native Indians of this island it is not in our power to do anything, as they remain in the North part of the land, perhaps 100 leagues from where we are. It will require a strong effort from the Government to effect such a work. The interior of the country has never been properly explored. A vessel should be fitted out for the purpose and should lie in wait on the sea coast to meet with them. This, we conceive, would be the most likely method to reach them" (276). A few weeks after this letter was posted Governor John Duckworth sent Captain David Buchan on a peace mission to Red Indian Lake. But the Beothuk were not to be appeased; they killed two of his marines and fled.

A year after Samson Busby's appointment as Methodist minister in Carbonear he informed the Wesleyan Missionary Committee in England that "the Aborigines have never been civilised but remain in their original state of barbarism and independence" (Busby 1814). Though troubled by the natives' heathen state, Busby became intensely distressed by rumours of their cruel treatment. In 1816 he reported some of the stories which had come to his attention. This letter has not been published previously and to retain the colour and tone of Busby's writing it is included here nearly in full:

. . . I cannot forbear to grieve at the painful details of murdered natives. Many instances of cruelty I have heard, but the following short account of one in particular exceeds them all and as those things have been but too common I see no reason to doubt its truth.

Towards the North-West of the Island the natives have frequently been seen and cruelly treated by Europeans and even shot without the least remorse. Retaliation at all opportunities might be expected. I understand that about 7 years ago

a young English fisherman being on this coast, became a victim to their resentment. The brother of the deceased determined a revenge and the following winter he took with him 7 others as wicked as himself with fire arms, ammunition and dogs to see the friendless race and avenge his brother's murder. After travelling 3 successive days and nights . . . they discovered . . . a large Indian town. In order to effect their malicious designs, they concealed themselves in different situations until morning; when an aged man, his hair as white as wool, appeared with a rod in his hand and began to measure a canoe which he was building. At this venerable man from the different quarters of his (before) peaceful abode was fired the life destroying metal. This horrid alarm drew forth an amazed group of unhappy mortals headed by a kind of chief or king, who, summoned by the multitude, ascended a scaffold, but by the continued and incessant firing of the merciless destroyers, he soon fell, and his agitated people fled for shelter to the adjacent woods and snow, but not before many were destroyed and soon none were left but such as could make no resistance. The wealth of the town became an easy prey to the murderers, who seizing the opportunity, entered the houses, walking over the dead bodies of their recent possessors, loaded their dogs with valuable furs, to a great amount, and went off with infernal triumph. Returning they were met in the path by two Indians, who, bowing to the ground, seemed to indicate thus capture and submission, these instantly became victims of their insatiate malice. Proceeding onward they shortly met a pregnant female whose supplicating posture cried aloud for mercy, but she found no mercy. Going on they began to suspect some danger, by the whining of their dogs and getting upon an eminence they observed a number of Indians buried to the neck in snow, these likewise they soon cut off and for the rest of the way they saw no more of them.

This is one melancholy recital out of many which I might relate. Does not their blood cry aloud to heaven?  
(Busby 1816)

Busby concluded that "such treatment as the native inhabitants have received has so confirmed their hatred to the Europeans that all attempts to civilize them have hitherto failed" (Busby 1816).

A comparison of Busby's letter with accounts appearing elsewhere suggests that his story consists of several different incidents merged into one. An attack on the Beothuk by an Englishman in revenge for the killing of his brother and a raid on a Beothuk camp on the banks of the Exploits River by furriers—both said to have occurred in the latter part of the eighteenth century—were reported by Rev. Cogan of the Church of England as two separate events (Howley 274). Cogan had heard that the raiders had fought a pitched battle with the Indians, who were led by a huge powerful-looking man, probably their chief. The latter tried to induce his party to rush on the white men but they were too afraid of the long flintlock guns and when the chief fell they fled. The furriers later said that had the Indians rushed on

them in a body as their chief desired they could have easily been killed before they had time to reload their guns. This account may be based on a raid reported by Captain G. C. Pulling, who had questioned several of the participants in 1792 (6-16). Although details vary, the main ingredients coincide, namely that the party was made up of eight men and their dogs, that they were taking revenge for the killing of a settler, Thomas Rowsell, that they travelled several days until they found a large Beothuk campsite and that they took away with them about one hundred caribou skins—though none of the men admitted to Pulling to having shot at the Indians.

Pulling also recorded an incident involving the killing of a pregnant woman by furriers (51) and most likely this report was later incorporated into Busby's account of the raid. Other details of Busby's tale, for example the presence of an old man who built a canoe in deep snow and the meeting of two more Indian groups on the way home, do not ring true and are probably further embellishments added to an incident which had occurred nearly three decades before. Several versions of this event and stories of other contacts with the Beothuk have since become part of an oral tradition in the northern bays, a source which Howley and others have tapped and recorded since the latter half of the nineteenth century (Howley; Jenness; Rowsell) but which is not entirely reliable.

The response of the Missionary Committee to Busby's letter—if there was one—has not been located. Presumably his graphic description would have intensified the brethren's anxiety on behalf of the Beothuk. However, they were powerless to stop the schemes of northern furriers and in no position to effect a conciliation between settlers and Beothuk.

Having been unsuccessful in contacting the Beothuk in their habitat several of the Methodist ministers availed themselves of an opportunity to visit and converse with Beothuk captives in St. John's. In 1819 the Rev. John Lewis, at the time Methodist missionary in Burin, obtained several interviews with Demasduwit, commonly known as Mary March. Demasduwit had been the victim of John Peyton's plan to cash in on the reward that was offered for the capture of a live Indian. With a well-armed party Peyton had trekked to Red Indian Lake and had surprised and taken her. Nonos-abaw-sut, her husband, who was also "chief," had fearlessly demanded her release but was shot. It was later learned that her child died two days after her capture.

Lewis described Demasduwit's appearance and bearing in a letter to the Missionary Committee (Lewis, letter) and his observations agree with those

of Rev. John Leigh of the S.P.G., Captain Hercules Robinson, and other contemporaries. According to these reports Demasduwit was a young woman about twenty-three years of age, copper-coloured, with black eyes and hair much like that of Europeans. She was tall and rather stout and had remarkably delicate and well-formed hands and feet, of which she was very proud. Her manner and countenance were thought to be mild and pleasing. A portrait of this young woman, painted in 1819 by Lady Hamilton, the Governor's wife, is the only authentic picture of a Beothuk extant and confirms some of these details (Marshall, "Miniature Portrait" 5). Rev. William Wilson recorded that "there was a dignity about her which led to the conviction that she was the wife of a Boeothick chief" (311). Several years later Shanawdithit confirmed this.

Perhaps to gauge her religious sensibilities the missionary took Demasduwit to several church services. Lewis found her demeanour appropriate to the occasion, but other than that, she seemed to be unimpressed and he was not able to determine whether she had any concept of a Divine Being. Lewis may have considered the Indians' possession of such a concept an important requisite for their successful instruction in the Christian Faith and his wish to test Demasduwit's perception suggests his undaunted hope for an opportunity to do so. Yet he correctly foresaw that the circumstances of her capture had prejudiced further attempts at making peace with the Indians (Lewis, letter). Wilson emphatically agreed: "To take a savage woman captive, and bring her away by force, in order to open a friendly intercourse with her tribe, was a clear absurdity," as was the opinion that she was better off while in St. John's than in her own country (310). In the following winter Captain David Buchan planned to return Demasduwit to her people, but before this could be accomplished she died of consumption. Buchan was deeply touched by her mild and gentle manner and her great patience under much suffering (Howley 121).

The residence of Demasduwit in St. John's induced the Wesleyan Missionary Committee to direct its brethren to avail themselves of any chance to contact the long isolated "aboriginal inhabitants of the interior" and to attempt their instruction (Wilson 312). But such an opportunity did not arise. Instead four years later other Beothuk, Shanawdithit and her mother and sister, were found by furriers in a starved condition. When they were brought to St. John's Rev. Wilson and Rev. Ellis, then ministers in Burin and Bonavista respectively, went to see them. A week later, on June 23, 1823, Wilson entered the following notation into his diary: "The mother is far advanced in life, but seems in good health. . . . The old woman was



morose, and had the look and action of a savage. She would sit all day on the floor with a deer-skin shawl on, and looked with dread or hatred upon every one that entered the court-house” (313-14). Wilson did not publish this description until 1866; it substantially contradicts the favourable and sympathetic impression of the older woman which he conveyed in his letter to the Missionary Committee on August 12, 1823. More frequent interaction with the three captives apparently convinced Wilson that none of them behaved in a savage manner and that the mother merely showed signs of having had a troubled life. This change of mind is interesting as it suggests that even a brief acquaintance with the Beothuk might have eased the settlers’ fears and eliminated their animosity.

One of the daughters was ill; the other, Shanawdithit, struck Wilson as a fine-looking person, nearly six feet tall with handsome features and a set of fine-looking teeth. If she had ever used ochre about her person, there was then no sign of it in her face. In her manner she was bland, affable and affectionate (313). Other observers said that she was also lively, ingenious, intelligent and quick to learn the English language (Howley 170, 172, 175, 260). Shanawdithit reacted with curiosity to the ticking of a watch and the properties of a looking glass, but a piece of white paper and a pencil to draw on it put her into raptures: in one flourish she drew a deer [caribou] perfectly, beginning at its tail (Wilson 314).

Though Shanawdithit and her mother appeared healthy to Wilson, Magistrate Peyton thought that the health of all three captives was precarious and the surgeon of H.M.S. *Grasshopper* was requested to do everything in his power to promote their recovery (Howley 170). Notwithstanding, Shanawdithit’s mother and sister died within a few weeks of their return to the Bay of Exploits and it is likely that Shanawdithit herself was also suffering from consumption, even though she lived for another six years before she succumbed to this disease.

In addition to satisfying their curiosity the main purpose of Wilson and Ellis’s visit seems to have been to assess whether the aborigines could be converted to Christianity. Wilson had no doubt that they could be taught but did not elaborate on how he came to hold this opinion. Mr. Curtis, a settler in the Bay of Exploits in whose house Shanawdithit and her family had stayed for several days, “never saw anything in the conduct of the woman to indicate a belief in God” (Howley 180). In 1827 Bishop John Inglis, on a visit from Nova Scotia, greatly lamented the fact that Shanawdithit had not received sufficient instruction to be baptized and confirmed; though in church “she perfectly understood that we were engaged in

religious services, and seemed struck with their solemnity" (Howley 297). Shanawdithit never embraced the Christian faith, and there is no evidence that any attempt was made to convert her. She died in 1829.

In 1823, the year in which Shanawdithit was captured, an Auxiliary Missionary Society for the Newfoundland District was formed in England and the chairman urged support with a special view to the enlightenment of the "aborigines of the Island." Since the Beothuk had already declined beyond recovery, this appeal was misplaced, though the instruction indicates the Methodists' continued interest in their spiritual welfare. So as not to be idle on this head, the Missionary Committee established a Methodist mission on the Labrador coast, south of the Moravians' sphere of influence, and thereby redirected their zeal for the salvation of natives to those who were accessible.

Years later, when to the general public the Beothuk had become legends, John S. Addy, a Methodist missionary from Trinity, visited Ward Harbour in Green Bay. Regarding the recently discovered burial sites of the Beothuk he reflected upon their history (Addy, letter). In spite of his sympathy with the Beothuk and his regret over their unfortunate fate, both Addy and before him Wilson thought of them as degraded people with dark and depraved minds—presumably because they were neither "civilized" nor Christians. Such pious and condescending rhetoric about the "savages" was quite prevalent in the early part of the nineteenth century, even among those who professed a sincere interest in the Indians, and most likely the two ministers merely expressed what was generally believed to be the case.

## Notes

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