

A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AN AHISTORICITY: ON THE BEOTHUK INDIANS

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The Beothuk Indians of Newfoundland have long been perceived as a cultural anachronism in the native history of northeastern North America. They appeared to represent cultural holdovers from some earlier age that had been preserved in a primitive state due to isolation on a cold North Atlantic isle. To many, their history seemed shallow, timeless even. Those that supported this position did so by drawing on four lines of evidence. They interpreted Beothuk material culture and other cultural “traits” as indicative of an archaic state; they cited the Beothuk’s place of residence—a northern island—as evidence of isolation from other peoples and the march of time; they cited linguistic differences as further evidence of isolation; and finally, the fact that the Beothuk became extinct seemed to offer proof that these people had indeed belonged to another age, incapable of making the leap from prehistory to the modern era. This article explores this evidence and attempts to understand the “logic” or rationale by which scholars come to view the Beothuk and their history as timeless.

Keywords: Beothuk Indians; Hunter-gatherers

INTRODUCTION

For some time now, anthropologists have been drawing attention to the lack of historical perspective in anthropological portrayals of the “Other” and in the theories and philosophies that inform these representations (Fabian 1983; Kuper 1988: 7; Stahl 1993; Thomas 1989). Hunter-gatherer scholarship has been a frequent and well-deserved target of many such critiques (Bender and Morris 1988; Gamble 1992a; Ingold 1986; Lourandos and Ross 1994; Morrison 2002; Sassaman 1998: 93; Schrire 1980, 1984; Thomas 1989: 11; Wilmsen 1989, 1999: 9). As they aptly point out, anthropologists have long perceived hunter-gatherers as living a “natural” life consumed with subsistence pursuits and mere survival, and isolated from other peoples and places. As a result, they appear timeless—truly a people without history. If acknowledged at all, hunter-gatherer histories resemble natural histories rather than “human-willed” ones.

While not true for all hunter-gatherers and all hunter-gatherer scholarship, such views certainly plague scholarship on the Beothuk Indians of Newfoundland. Extinct, perhaps culturally and linguistically unique, and seemingly the inhabitants of an austere and remote island in the far North Atlantic, the Beothuk have long been imagined as an archaic, timeless people. This article explores the evidence and logic used to support this portrayal.

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THE BEOTHUK IN THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

The place of the Beothuk in North American ethnology has been “one of the puzzles of anthropology” (Hartland 1915: 330; see also Speck 1926: 277). Almost as soon as the Beothuk disappeared in the early nineteenth century, scholars began to debate who these people were and their place in the native history of the Northeast. Some thought that the Beothuk were related to other Algonquian people (Bourinot 1868a, 1868b; Campbell 1892: 26; Lloyd 1876). Others believed that the Beothuk were the sole surviving representatives of an entirely different people (Gatschet 1886). A few drew far-flung and fantastic connections to Polynesia, Europe and Asia (see Campbell 1892; Howley 1915: 251–255; Patterson 1891); and some still do (Aysimiminha 1994; Fraser 1962; Horwood n.d.; Winter 1975: 136).

William Cormack—naturalist, intellectual and founder of the Beothick Institution—was perhaps the Beothuk’s first, last and only ethnographer. Over the course of about four months (Marshall 1996: 217), Cormack interrogated a captured Beothuk woman, Shanawdithit, on all things Beothuk. He gathered from her valuable information regarding their language, material culture and recent history, as well as a number of beautiful maps and drawings sketched by Shanawdithit herself. Cormack’s enquiries laid the foundation for all subsequent work on the Beothuk (see Howley 1915). Sadly, his work became invaluable when Shanawdithit, the last Beothuk known to Europeans, succumbed to consumption in 1829. Cormack believed that the Beothuk were an “isolated nation” and, as such, could illuminate an era prior to the “discovery of America by Europeans” (Howley 1915: 210). He was excited by the prospect of studying the Beothuk to understand “the development of man from primitive to civilised” (Cormack papers, quoted in Marshall 1996: 216). Shanawdithit’s untimely death and other obligations put an end to such pursuits, but Cormack’s ideas and speculations concerning the Beothuk lived on.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Beothuk figured prominently in the debate as to identity of the ancient “Red Paint People” of Maine. After years of archaeological investigation at “Red Paint” sites, Charles Willoughby (1898; 1915: 409; 1935: 11, 63) concluded that the Beothuk represented a surviving branch of these people who had been driven eastward by invading tribes from the west (Willoughby 1898: 435, 1935: 14). Warren Moorehead, another veteran archaeologist of the Red Paint People, however, disagreed. Where Willoughby and others drew parallels between Red Paint and Beothuk artifacts, Moorehead (1916, 1917: 51) identified differences: “If the Beothuks and the Red Paint People are one and the same, there is little indication of the identity in a cultural similarity” (Moorehead 1922: 150).

Moorehead’s refusal to link the Red Paint People to the Beothuk likely stemmed from his belief in a “great gulf” between Native American people past and present (Moorehead 1910: II: 4). Moorehead (1910: II: 4–6; 1914: 361; 1924: 35) consistently argued that modern native peoples had been too influenced by Europeans to be of any use to archaeology. Perhaps, as some of his critics seem to suggest (Bushnell 1913, 1915; Moore 1914, 1915), he simply treasured the mystery and antiquity of the Red Paint People too much to forfeit them to the Beothuk or anyone else (see Moorehead 1913, 1914, 1916). In any case, Moorehead’s position was unique. Most of his contemporaries sided with Willoughby, believing that the Beothuk were either surviving remnants of the Red Paint People or cultural representatives of some other earlier archaic stratum (Birket-Smith 1918: 220; Dixon 1913: 559, 1914: 76; Speck 1916, 1922: 13–15, 1926: 277). The prominent Algonquianist Frank Speck, for example, posited that the Beothuk represented the last of the Early Algonquian type (Speck 1922, 1926: 309, 1931: 572), although he also considered connections to Eskimo peoples, Labrador Indians—and like Willoughby—the Red Paint People (Speck 1916, 1922: 13–15, 1926: 277).

As with many anthropologists of the day, Speck was interested in salvaging pre-contact “ethnographies” from extant native communities. In direct contrast to Moorehead’s “great gulf” Speck saw a living past all around him preserved in the memories of native elders. In a well-known example, Speck surprised the Columbia linguist J. Dyneley Prince by offering some specifics on Pequot, an Indian language thought dead by many scholars (Fenton 1990: 97–98; Prince and Speck 1903a: 347). Speck had learned the language as a child while under the care of an Indian widow, Fidelia A. Fielding (Feit 1991: 114). Mrs Fielding later served as the chief informant for Speck’s and Dyneley’s linguistic studies (Prince and Speck 1903b: 196).

If wrenching ethnography and “dead” languages from native populations in early twentieth-century New England was possible, Speck must have been optimistic about his chances for salvaging ethnographies north of New England. Speck appears to have believed that northern native peoples had been isolated from European influence, and as such, could offer insights into a pre-contact aboriginal past. He treasured his barren ground Naskapi (Innu) collections for just this reason: “they are the last of the Nomadic Sub-Arctic Algonkians to have *preserved their original culture intact from contamination* with white traders and missions” (U.M. archives, Anthropology Department boxed files on Frank Speck, n.d., quoted in Medoff 1991: 110, emphasis added). In essence, if one could control for European influence then one could assume that these societies had not changed since time immemorial. Speck’s Naskapi (Innu) were denied history by just this logic; the Beothuk—thought isolated, unique and with little history of European interaction—would share a similar fate (Speck 1916, 1922: 13–15, 1926: 277).

The idea that the Beothuk represented cultural survivals of an earlier age was also embraced by most archaeologists. Although William Duncan Strong went a long way toward differentiating historic native artifacts from ancient “old stone” artifacts in the Eastern Subarctic, he regarded the Beothuk as the most likely candidates for an “old stone” association. Following Willoughby, Strong (1930: 140–141) posited that: “[The Beothuk] might well have represented the last survivors of the [old stone] culture driven to their island home by the later incursion of the Labrador Eskimo from the north and the Algonkian groups from the south and west.” Diamond Jenness appears to have shared this view too. Jenness (1936: 66) believed that the Eastern Algonquians had a long history in North America and that the Beothuk were a peculiar branch of these people (Jenness 1934: 32, 1929: 37) that had been pushed to Newfoundland by invading Malecite and Mi’kmaq peoples (Jenness 1936: 66). Here, Jenness seems to entertain the idea that the Beothuk were remnants of an ancient native population that had once occupied the entire Northeast (see also Jenness 1927, 1936: 79). Arctic archaeologist Elmer Harp was far clearer on the issue. To Harp, the Beothuk were the “bearers of an archaic form of culture” (1951: 219), the last of a “very old cultural stratum” (1957: 66), “a survival of pre-Algonkian times” (1957: 66, see also Harp 1964a: 153).

The notion of Beothuk cultural antiquity was taken to extremes in the 1960s by Emerson Greenman. Then professor of archaeology at the University of Michigan, Greenman frequently cited the Beothuk to support his claim that the New World was first settled by Upper Paleolithic peoples from Europe. Greenman (1960, 1963) proposed that European pioneers had made their way to the New World (Newfoundland) via North Atlantic ice flows, hunting marine mammals and fashioning tools from stones affixed to icebergs along the way. The journey was thought to have taken centuries! In support of his theory, Greenman (1960, 1963) drew parallels between Beothuk material culture and artwork (sketched by Shanawdithit) with those of Upper Paleolithic France. Greenman, it seems, had taken John Dawson’s imaginative nineteenth-century description of Cartier’s encounter with the Beothuk to heart: [Cartier, gazing at the Beothuk] “stood in the presence of the precise equivalent of the flint folk of his own country, just as they would have appeared, if raised

from their graves in the French caverns, with their flint arrows, bone spears, harpoons and shell ornaments” (Dawson 1880: 19).

MAKING AHISTORY

Why were the Beothuk continually perceived of as an archaic people not of this age—their history timeless? Of course, they were not selected randomly from the pages of ethnology and given this unfortunate distinction. Rather, the Beothuk became “ahistoric” in the anthropological imagination because aspects of their culture and geography satisfied ideas of what archaic cultures were supposed to look like and where they would be found; interpretations of timelessness followed from this. In general, ahistoric interpretations of the Beothuk appear to have drawn on four key lines of “evidence:” ethnological traits and material culture; geography; language; and the Beothuk’s extinction.

Ethnological Traits and Material Culture

Beothuk ahistories were anchored, in part, in the interpretation of ethnological and archaeological evidence. Evidence consisted of “traits,” observable units of habit, custom, behaviour and material culture. The collective assemblage of these traits was thought to constitute who the Beothuk were and to offer insight into the course of their history.

For many scholars, archaeological evidence suggested that the historic Beothuk were surviving remnants of an earlier culture that had once enjoyed a wide distribution throughout the far Northeast. In part, they drew this conclusion because Beothuk material culture appeared to resemble artifacts unearthed at ancient sites throughout Maine and the Maritimes. Unbeknownst to these observers, however, was that “Beothuk” assemblages at the time often contained artifacts of various ages and cultural affiliations. Sometimes entire assemblages were incorrectly attributed to the Beothuk (cf. Howley 1915: 330; Lloyd 1875: 36; Macdougall 1891). The problem can be traced in part to Howley, who in 1915 published *The Beothucks or Red Indians, the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Newfoundland*. Howley’s now classic volume was a virtual compendium of all things known about the Beothuk at the time. What was not known, however, was that the Beothuk were but one of several aboriginal peoples to have occupied the island in prehistory. Howley’s plates of “Beothuk” artifacts actually represented archaeological material that spanned more than 5,000 years of history and at least two major aboriginal occupations—Maritime Archaic (formerly “Red Paint”) and PaleoEskimo peoples. Yet inquiring armchair anthropologists who studied Howley’s plates saw only “Beothuk”.

The problem of mixed assemblages certainly provided some of the rationale for a Beothuk-Red Paint association. Willoughby, no doubt identifying “Red Paint” (Maritime Archaic) ground stone artifacts such as adzes and gouges in what he believed to be entirely Beothuk collections, would have found it easy to link the Beothuk to these people. Early speculations of Beothuk connections to (Paleo) Eskimo populations presumably stemmed from perusals through mixed assemblages as well (Harp 1953: 45). Mathiassen (1930: 597–598), for example, attributed PaleoEskimo soapstone lamps to the Beothuk. Jenness attributed some PaleoEskimo items to the Beothuk as well, or as an indication of Beothuk-PaleoEskimo interaction (Fitzhugh 1980: 22; Harp 1964a: 166; Jenness 1929: 8, 37; 1933: 395).

Cultural affiliation was further problematized by the less-than-professional means by which most archaeological material was obtained. Indeed, one anthropologist complained that Howley’s book was an “unsatisfactory description of the looting of Newfoundland” (Johnson 1937: 164). With time, however, anthropologists began to sort out the region’s

archaeological record. In Labrador, William Duncan Strong (1930: 126–127) delineated an “old stone culture” which he believed represented a stage prior to Eskimo and Indian occupation. Archaeologists would agree with Strong’s assessment today; much of the “old stone” material is now assigned to the Maritime Archaic culture—a culture that predates PaleoEskimo and more recent Indian populations in the region. Strong’s research effectively widened the temporal distance between earlier Indian populations and later Inuit and ethnographically documented Indian peoples such as the Innu (Montagnais and Naskapi) (see also Wintemberg 1939, 1940). Yet, despite his own findings, Strong (1930:141) was reluctant to sever Beothuk ties to the “old stone” culture: “if it [the Old Stone Culture] can be assigned to any historic people the Beothuk of Newfoundland seem the most logical candidates”.

In 1949, Elmer Harp traveled to Newfoundland determined to solve the Beothuk problem. His goal was to identify the Beothuk in the archaeological record and understand their origins (Harp 1951: 217; 1964a: 5). In this regard, he was largely unsuccessful; despite extensive surveys Harp found little Beothuk material and instead spent most of his time excavating Dorset PaleoEskimo sites on the island’s west coast (see Harp 1964a). Nonetheless, he speculated on Beothuk culture and history. Harp realized that previous scholars had made the mistake of attributing all of the island’s archaeological record to the Beothuk (Harp 1953: 45; 1964a: 140, 166). It was clear that other groups had also occupied the island in pre/history. Although this problematized claims to a long and unbroken Beothuk presence on the island, Harp and other scholars held steadfast to the idea that the Beothuk were the “living” link to an ancient Indian population that once resided in the far Northeast. Indeed, Harp continued to hold this position even as it was becoming increasingly clear (see Wintemberg 1939, 1940) that a PaleoEskimo presence on the island in antiquity would have disrupted chronological and cultural continuity between the Beothuk and this ancient population. Even after carbon dating finally established the deep antiquity of early Indian populations in the Northeast (Maritime Archaic) and widened the temporal gap between these people and later PaleoEskimo populations, Harp (1953: 44) maintained that diffusion between the two was still possible if, as Ritchie (1951: 49) suggested, “[a] delayed or tarriant tradition in the isolated Gulf of St Lawrence region served as the agent of diffusion”. Harp thought it possible and volunteered the Beothuk as the bearers of this tarriant tradition (Harp 1953: 44, 1964a: 165–166). For Harp, and others, the Beothuk were “culturally and chronologically” (Harp 1964b: 258) closer to earlier archaic peoples than other groups in the Northeast, despite growing archaeological evidence to the contrary. Frank Speck’s hope that archaeology would solve the Beothuk problem (Speck 1931: 571–572) was not immediately realized.

Undoubtedly, early archaeologists were swayed by prevailing ethnological interpretations of the Beothuk. Anthropologists had long cited the apparent peculiarity of Beothuk habits, customs and material culture as evidence of their isolation, primitiveness and cultural antiquity. The Beothuk’s preference for decapitation as opposed to scalping, for example, was offered as evidence of their great antiquity and highly primitive state (Campbell 1892: 26; Patterson 1891: 165; Pilot and Gray 1910: II; Wintemberg n.d.). Indeed this same logic was recently invoked again in support of the persistence of “tradition” among the Beothuk:

Some cultural traits exhibited by the Beothuk in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had formerly been common among a number of native groups who had since abandoned them, indicating that the Beothuk adhered to traditions more rigorously and for a longer time. As late as the nineteenth century, the Beothuk decapitated slain enemies and danced around their heads in victory feasts, a custom that other tribes had long since relinquished. (Marshall 1996: 441)

Scholars also used cultural peculiarities to suggest that the Beothuk had been isolated from their neighbors: “Their light complexion, their abundant use of red paint, their lodges, their canoes (which were of a peculiar shape), their custom of cutting off the head

of a fallen foe, all distinguish the tribe from adjacent peoples” (Hartland 1915: 333). Even the absence of a T-shaped heel seam at the bottom of Beothuk moccasins suggested that the Beothuk had been isolated from their neighbors: “The technical simplicity of the T-shaped heel seam and its uniform adoption by the mainland Algonkian-speaking peoples suggested that the historic Beothuk were unaware of its existence” (Chute 1976: 197). Thus, “Beyond the far eastern margin of the Montagnais/Naskapi territory, the Beothuk maintained a separate cultural existence from the surrounding Algonkian-speaking tribes” (Chute 1976: 367, see also p. 135). Chute (1976: 367–371) concludes—as did many others—by drawing connections between the Beothuk and earlier Maritime Archaic (“Red Paint”) peoples.

GEOGRAPHY

Early scholars believed that the Beothuk were the surviving remnants of a people who fled to Newfoundland to escape invading native peoples from the west (Dixon 1914: 76; Gatschet 1886: 427, 1890: 13; Harp 1964a: 156; Jenness 1936: 79–80; Speck 1922: 13–15, 1926: 309; Willoughby 1898: 435, 1935: 11,14). Once there, the Beothuk were thought to have been isolated from other people and oblivious to events unfolding around them; “isolated and undisturbed, for several centuries, untainted by intermixture with other tribes they could retain all their original traits of character, language, etc., which remained with them as distinctive features down to the last moments of their existence” (Howley 1915: xix); “. . . these people appear to have been a last *isolated* outpost of the ancient tradition which they or their forebears at one time carried over from the mainland” (Harp 1964a: 156, emphasis added); and finally: “Whereas progress continued to be made elsewhere on the continental shores, Newfoundland, as time went by, became the localized hunting ground of two cultural hold-overs [Beothuk and PaleoEskimo]” (Harp 1957: 68).

The idea that the Beothuk represented a “surviving” remnant of an earlier people flourished in an intellectual environment that embraced diffusionism as a methodological and theoretical approach to understanding the course of Beothuk (a)history. Although diffusionism encompassed a variety of positions (see Goldenweiser 1925; Smith 1978), in general it conceptualized a historical landscape composed of centres of social change—places where artifacts and/or ideas originate—and frontiers where artifacts and/or ideas arrive much later. One imagines the bow and arrow radiating out from the point of its invention to the far reaches of the globe or a cultural “trait” like scalping replacing a presumed older head-hunting tradition (see discussion above). Logically, diffusionism made it possible to use artifacts and ethnographic traits to understand the history of an area or people. Fredricka DeLaguna (1946: 110) summarized the approach as follows: “Thus we see our culture as a kind of onion-like growth, built up by the accretion of many layers which we can peel off again to exhibit the history of its development.”

The upshot of this was that diffusionism allowed for the possibility that one could actually discover peoples still living lives little changed over thousands of years: headhunters lacking bows and arrows, for example. Conceptually, if you could identify the places where such people still lived, you could journey there and, in theory, step back in time. The obvious anthropological appeal of such places stimulated many to ponder where they might be found (Birket-Smith 1918, 1929, 1930: 25–26; Boas 1910; Cooper 1946: 303–305; Rasmussen 1928; Spaulding 1946: 165; Speck 1926, 1936). Many looked north. Franz Boas (1910: 532–533), for example, suggested that early Algonquian cultures might be found in the Great Lake region and in the interior of Labrador. And perhaps following Boas’ advice, Frank Speck traveled north to Newfoundland and Labrador.

Speck came to envision the entire Northeast as “one of the world’s marginal cultural zones, an archaic one, where human groups have resided for a long time apart from culture changes and innovations which have arisen elsewhere on the continent” (Speck 1926: 272; see also Holmes 1914: 420). Explaining this, Speck (1926: 272) argues that one “need only consider the isolated position, the wide, cold and inhospitable country, thinly populated and removed from outside contact by reason of its continental terminal position and distance”. Elmer Harp shared Speck’s dismal outlook on the Northeast: “the land was cold, lonely, and inhospitable, and subsequent local development of culture was relatively weak” (Harp 1957: 65). Within this already marginal area, Newfoundland and Labrador were seen as most marginal (Harp 1957: 68; Spaulding 1946: 165; Speck 1926: 273–274; Tuck 1978: 167). Here was a place where the “historic” Beothuk, Naskapi (Innu) and Inuit were thought to live as they had lived long ago.

People inhabiting places on the edges of our maps, lands with which we are unfamiliar, and other wild landscapes, have long been viewed by anthropologists as timeless or archaic (Arnold 2000; Duviols 1997; Gamble 1992a, 1992b; Headland 1997: 605–606; Holly in press; Huigen 1996; Levine 1997; Murray 1992; Rainbird 1999; Schrire 1984; Sponsel 1992; Stahl 1993; Van Wyk Smith 1992; Wilmsen 1989). Remote islands, empty deserts and impenetrable forests it seems are especially ripe places for ahistory. In this context, Newfoundland, a northern island on the edge of a continent, became evidence in itself that the Beothuk had been isolated from other people, and by extension, from winds of change.

LANGUAGE

Albert Gatschet (1886) of the American Bureau of Ethnology was among the first, and certainly the most respected, early authority to consider the Beothuk’s language unique enough to be considered an isolate, deserving of its own language family. Gatschet’s position drew and has since drawn many supporters (Brinton 1891: 68; Campbell and Mithun 1979; Powell 1891; Sapir 1921: 408; Swanton and Dixon 1914: 395; Voegelin and Voegelin 1946, 1963, 1965), including most recently, Goddard (1978: 77, 1996: 8). Dissenters place the Beothuk’s language within the Algonquian family, albeit recognizing that it may occupy a unique niche or remote branch within the family (Campbell 1892: 26; Greenberg 1953: 283; Hewson 1971: 248, 1978; Latham 1850; Powell 1891; Sapir 1949: 171–172).

As with other dimensions of their culture, the apparent uniqueness of the Beothuk’s language was cited by many scholars as evidence of isolation. Linguistic differences along with “ethnological particulars”, for instance, led Gatschet to believe that they “may have lived for centuries *isolated* upon Newfoundland” (Gatschet 1886: 427, emphasis added). Of course once isolation is established timelessness is soon to follow.

According to these ideas, the purest retention of the cultural (including linguistic) features of early migrations would be the farthest away from the point of entry or in isolated cul-de-sacs, such as peninsulas and islands where displacement or absorption would be more difficult. Thus we would expect that the early languages would be best retained in South America, or perhaps by such isolates as the Guaycura at the tip of the Baja Peninsula or the Beothuk of Newfoundland. (Price 1979: 26)

Isolation (or the assumption thereof), as indicated by geography or interpreted from “unique” cultural traits, has long informed Beothuk language classification. Gatschet (1885, 1886: 427, 1890: 13; see also Hewson 1968: 91), for example, clearly used ethnological evidence to support his position that the Beothuk language was unique. Other early researchers who were familiar with the anthropological literature, aware of a general

consensus on the anomalous ethnological position of the Beothuk and who shared similar geographic notions of isolation are likely to have done the same. The temptation to draw on other sources of information to aid in linguistic classification was certainly great; Beothuk linguistic evidence is limited to a few word lists that are riddled with semantic, pronunciation and translation errors (Gatschet 1886: 416–417; Goddard 1978: 77, 1979: 106; Hewson 1978: 135). Accordingly, in the absence of better data, many scholars likely fell back on preconceived notions of geographic isolation and trait “evidence” for cultural uniqueness when reaching final decisions on where to place the Beothuk’s language.

Archaeological evidence, historical documents and simple geographic observations, however, all fail to support the isolation argument. Stylistic similarities in tool types and the wide distribution of exotic raw materials throughout the Strait of Belle Isle region, for instance, indicate far-flung trade and exchange networks in prehistory (Holly 2002; Hull 2002; Loring 1988, 1992, 2002; Pastore 1989, 1992; Pinal 1989, 1998; Reader 1993; Renouf 1999; Wright 1994). Likewise, historic documents and ethnographic accounts clearly attest to the wide circulation of trade goods and movement of native peoples within the region (Jukes 1842: 129; Mailhot 1986, 1997; Martijn 1989, 1990). Finally, the narrow expanse of the Strait of Belle Isle itself—only twenty kilometers in places—suggests that it served more as a highway than as an obstacle to interaction (Harp 1957: 65; Hull 2002; Pastore 1989: 64; Renouf 1999; Robbins 1989). As such, linguistic uniqueness—even if true—cannot infer isolation. The active circulation of people and artifacts through the region suggests some level of mutual intelligibility or bilingualism between the Beothuk and their neighbors.

It is also possible that the Beothuk language was not very different to those spoken on the adjacent mainland. Some linguists, for instance, have suggested a closer relationship between Beothuk and neighboring Algonquian languages. Hewson (1978: 143) is adamant that the Beothuk word for red ochre, “*odemem*”, is an Algonquian word. Thus, in order to make the claim that the Beothuk language was a linguistic isolate, *odemem* would have to be interpreted as a borrowed word (Hewson 1978: 143); incidentally, Gatschet (1886: 424–426) does just that. Given the prominent role of red ochre in Beothuk culture, world-view and identity (Holly 2000; Marshall 1996), however, it is unlikely that this is the case (Hewson 1978: 143).

EXTINCTION

Beothuk history ended when Shanawdithit, the last Beothuk known to Europeans, succumbed to tuberculosis in St John’s in 1829. With her death, Beothuk ahistory began. Although extinction is not a prerequisite for ahistory (see Wilmsen 1999), extinction certainly ends history. In extinction, the Beothuk were denied a living legacy, one that would have served as a reminder to all of the Beothuk’s place in the modern world and in history.

Extinction also effectively truncated the written record of these people; prospects for rich and lengthy historical treatises of these people were lost with their early demise. The few surviving documents that bear directly on the Beothuk simply do not facilitate the production of rich narrative histories. As such, the Beothuk story has become a short and tragic tale of extinction—one lacking the breadth and depth of other native histories of subarctic peoples (Abel 1998; Francis and Morantz 1983; Helm 2000; Lantis 1970; Lytwyn 2002; Ray 1974). In these ways, the Beothuk’s (short) historical record implicitly lent support to anthropological portraits of Beothuk ahistory and timelessness. With little record of post-contact adaptations—with little documented proof of change—the Beothuk were easily appropriated as prehistoric analogues, as windows into a distant past: “we must recognize in Beothuk an

anomalous survivor of a past observable only in shadowy outline, as through a dark glass” (Voegelin and Voegelin 1946: 194).

Finally for some, extinction seemed to offer proof that the Beothuk were a primitive, timeless people, not of this age. The Beothuk were doomed, simply, because they were *of the past*. James Howley, Newfoundland patriot, proponent of progress, and chronicler of the Beothuk, lamented at their loss: “poor caribou, like the Red Indians, will have to give place to the march of civilization” (Kirwin *et al.* 1997: xlvii). In another passage, Howley invokes Red Indian Lake—the Beothuk’s last refuge—in documenting the advance of civilization and the disappearance of primitive things, such as the Beothuk:

Now all is changed, steamers and motor boats replace the Beothuk’s canoe and are continuously plying up and down the lake, houses and logging camps dotting its shores, even hotels established on the very sites of the Red man’s mamateeks, his former abodes. The march of progress is everywhere in evidence, but the primitive beauty and solitude have gone forever. (Kirwin *et al.* 1997: 4)

Many of Howley’s contemporaries shared his dismal outlook on the future of Newfoundland’s native people and of others too. “The fate of the Red Indians of Newfoundland foreshadows that which is rapidly overtaking the tribes that still inhabit Labrador. Indeed, in all parts of America the doom of the aborigines appears determined. Everywhere they are receding before the irresistible progress of the pioneers of civilization” (Bourinot 1868b: 94). “No sound of the Indians is heard; no smoke is seen issuing from their wigwams; their camp fires are extinguished forever . . . their fate fills another dark page in the progress of civilization in the new world” (Winton 1886: 8). Such ideas found fertile ground in the nineteenth century as scholars and concerned citizens lamented the erosion of “traditional” Native American cultures in the wake of contact and commerce with European settlers. In search of ways to make sense of these events, many came to understand extinction and assimilation as inevitable and the sad price of progress (Trigger 1980: 663–664). Even recently, the anthropologist John Price (1979: 77) has suggested that “[the Beothuk] were extinct today, in part because of . . . the great evolutionary difference between the simple Beothuk and the European settlers who destroyed them”. In these cases, the Beothuk’s extinction seemed to offer some evidence that they had belonged to some incompatible earlier age—that their very presence in a modern world was an anachronism that time and progress would eventually resolve.

CONCLUSION

Time might prove connections between the Beothuk and ancient Red Paint People (Maritime Archaic) after all. Tuck (1975: 141, 1976a: 122, 1976b: 68–69, n.d.: 159) has long posited a historical relationship between the two groups and others have followed suit (Austin 1980; Carignan 1977, 1979; Madden 1976: 138). Currently, however, there is little archaeological evidence to directly support this view. Maritime Archaic (Red Paint) populations on the Island of Newfoundland either seem to have disappeared or emigrated off the island sometime around 1000 BC. Hundreds of years later, the island was resettled by PaleoEskimos. Indian peoples do not return to the island in significant numbers until the first century AD (Hartery 2001). Some of these peoples are likely the ancestors of the Beothuk—and some of these people are likely the distant descendants of mainland Maritime Archaic peoples. So the Beothuk may “be” Red Paint People after all.

Tuck’s position, however, does not require belief in timeless Beothuk. Indeed, the archaeological record of the region offers evidence of considerable social change over the last two thousand years: the initial arrival of Indian peoples onto a landscape occupied by

PaleoEskimos; several hundred years of PaleoEskimo-Indian interaction; the disappearance or northward retreat of PaleoEskimo peoples from the island; subsequent Indian adaptations to an open landscape devoid of “others;” the arrival (and then speedy departure) of Norse explorers and settlers; and finally, a growing and eventually suffocating influx of European fishermen and settlers. As valuable as they are to us today, the drawings and recollections Cormack gathered from Shanawdithit on her “death bed”, thus can never speak to all Beothuk experiences—to all Beothuk times. Beothuk life and lifeways were always changing to accommodate or to modify the social worlds in which they lived. Likewise, the Beothuk did not live in isolation from their neighbours or oblivious from the passage of time. As indicated in historic documents, the wide distribution of raw materials and stylistic similarities in archaeological assemblages across the region, and by the simple proximity of the island to the mainland, it is clear that the Beothuk inhabited an island at a crossroads of commerce and human interaction. This was the centre of their world.

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