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Hunger Pains In A Cold Forest:
A Reexamination Of The Disappearance Of The Beothuk

by Mike Codato

Introduction

Over the years many theories have been advanced to explain the early nineteenth century disappearance of the Beothuk Indians of Newfoundland. The most popular stories involve malevolence on the part of the Europeans who settled along the coast. In this paper, I will explore the notion that the end of the Beothuk was not the deliberate result of Europeans committing a calculated policy of genocide and may not have occurred in 1829 with the death of Shanawdithit; more, it was a gradual and inevitable decline of a people brought about by starvation, oppression, assimilation with other native peoples, misunderstandings with the Europeans, and general misery. Through inference based on historical eye-witness testimony, the evidence suggests, at the very least, that the Beothuk people, if not the culture, lived on for a few more decades as members of other First Nations in the area.

Part One: European Malevolence or Benevolence?

Perhaps the strongest feeling one gets when reading accounts of the Beothuk is the utter hopelessness of the situation. In all the of the books surveyed for this paper, the authors note that many attempts were made to contact the Beothuk peacefully; and indeed most of the formal expeditions undertaken into the interior of Newfoundland during this period were for this express purpose. Unfortunately, in almost every case good intentions turned tragic and deaths occurred, on both sides. These incidents are often remembered differently by members of the same party (example given below); therefore it is imperative that one remain critical when reading accounts of the Beothuk. With this in mind, Howe (1977:1-9) has questioned the validity of most literature pertaining to the Beothuk up to the time of his manuscript by pointing out discrepancies. A few interesting points have emerged.

One generally accepted theme in Newfoundland history concerns how Europeans systematically massacred the Beothuk people through superiority in numbers and technology (English:9). Indeed as Keith Winter (1975:7) would have us believe, Europeans actually considered the slaughter of the Beothuks a sport, and during fur raids into the villages,

...men were shot in the back as they ran away; women were butchered as they knelt exposing their breasts to indicate their sex and begging for mercy, and the children were rounded up and their throats were cut...

Most of Winters' account of contact between the Europeans and the Beothuk are just as prosaic, with the details equally vivid. A further example concerns a tradition first accounted by Howely (1974:265) in three lines.

...another tradition was current to the effect that on one occasion 400 Indians were surprised and driven out onto a point of land near Hant's Harbour, known as Bloody Point, and all were destroyed...

This tradition of presenting Beothuk history was categorically claimed as truth and later expanded for dramatic effect by Winters (1975:8) to the effect that,

...an armed party of fishermen surprised a village of four hundred Beothuks. They herded everyone together... There, crowded together on the last of a few yards of land, the terrified people stood helpless as the guns began to fire...The men and women were killed first. The children huddled together, crying, afraid, unable to comprehend the horror of the mass execution. Then the fishermen moved in with knives and axes. They grabbed the children by the hair and cut their throats... The air was filled with the cries of the
dying; the ground oozed with blood. The fishermen waded in and finished off the dying with their axes...."

In each example neither author makes a reference to the original source of the tradition. If this tradition is to be taken as truth it does propose a rather drastic depopulation of the Beothuk people. Rowe (1977:30) suggests that the massacre must have taken place after 1640 if it happened and questions the fact that it happened at all due to the fact that, up to 1977 (date of the publication for his manuscript), no archaeological evidence has been found to collaborate the "tradition". Perhaps "European brutality" can better be recognized in the documented accounts presented and collaborated by many people although still not completely understood.

One excellent example of the barbarity of the settlers as perceived by the Natives occurred during the capture of Demasduit for which there are three accounts. The first account is by John Peyton Junior and may have been biased, according to Rowe (1977:63), by a standing order initiated by the Grand Jury emphasizing that no Indians from the island were to be harmed and that people would be held accountable if any harm came to them. John Peyton Junior may have been protecting his Father, Peyton Senior, in whose defense it had been necessary to kill an Indian. Peyton Junior recounting the event (1987:43) proposes that nobody knew who fired the shot and that any action undertaken was in the perceived defense of the elder Peyton who was being choked by Nonosbawsut, Demasduit's husband. An account of the events presented by Marion Peyton (ibid), wife of a direct descendent, appears to place the sole blame for the incident on the Indians since they didn't desist when confronted by the superior firepower toted by the Europeans.

The second account related by Mr. E. Slade (Winter 1975:58-59), a contemporary of the event, reported that Nonosbawsut approached peacefully (no mention of an attack on Peyton Senior is related) apparently delivering a "long oration" and then tried to retrieve Demasduit. However, when he was turned away he brandished an axe whereupon he was stabbed with a bayonet, stabbed with a dirk, and shot about three times before he fell. Slade also boasts (Winter, 1975:59) that he himself tried to wrestle the down single-handedly in defense of the party. According to Rowe (1977:63) Peyton indicated that no man by the name of was part of the party which makes his contributions all the more amazing. It was noted by Rowe (1977:63) that Slade's account was related ten years after the event and may have been the product of exaggeration rather than anything factual. Winter also writes (1975:60) that Slade's version of the story was collaborated by another member of the party, John Day, according to Peyton Junior, was a member of the party.

The third account of the events first detailed by Peyton was related by Shanawdithit during interviews with William Epps Cormack prior to her death in 1829. The account simply mentioned that two Beothuk were killed during the encounter in order (Rowe, 1977:63). This may be interpreted a couple a couple of ways. First, the discrepancy in number of Native deaths may have been a deliberate attempt by Peyton to mask the severity of the encounter in order to keep his story short and simple when he had to confront the Grand Jury and account for his actions that day. This would account for Slade's testimony if he wasn't actually there and was only relating what he had been told to him upon the parties return which would have indicated only one Native death. Second, Shanawdithit may have been speaking figuratively referring, additionally, to a young child belonging to Demasduit who would not survive without her (Peyton, 1987:46; Speck, 1922:50).

The Beothuk were by no means the only victims. Many incidents have been recorded highlighting their brutal treatment of white settlers. Peyton (1987:7) relates an episode whereby the first five men to settle in the area of Grand Bay Newfoundland were "...found [murdered], the dead bodies had been beheaded and the heads placed upon poles..." Reports of the era suggest that these events were not isolated and coupled with the anti-settler theory (Rowe:108) reinforced the notion "...that [the entire Beothuk history] showed that the one ineradicable feature in their character was an insatiable hatred of the pale faces..." Another event for which there is more proof concerns the Buchan expedition of 1819 (Winter 1975:33--36) wherein two royal marines left with the Beothuk while Buchan and the rest of the party returned to the base camp for gifts, were killed because of a misinterpretation over Buchan's reason for leaving. The Beothuk believed that the party had left to get reinforcements.

The acts claimed to have been committed by the Beothuk must be looked at with an eye for exaggeration, but even with this consideration, the truth is that many of the Beothuk had many of the same virtues and faults that characterised most of the other Native groups in North America. In this regard the Beothuk were probably no better, and no worse, than the Europeans. Again, however, we stumble across an area where misunderstanding may have emerged.

Emphasizing the misunderstandings, many of the incidents involving the Beothuk revolved around parties that were sent out to contact them in the hopes of retrieving stolen property with the secondary goal of securing friendly relations (Howley 1974:111; Peyton
were upset by the missing objects. It may have been behind it. One popular theory (Peyton 1987; Winter)
grounds that finished them off. I will now explore crimes were committed by both sides. As indicated
slaughtered and eventually wiped out. Although Europeans could not comprehend the concept of communal property ownership since they themselves lived by a law of individual ownership. Howley (1974:96) claims however that among themselves "...[the] Beothuk recognised individual ownership of equipment, [weapons], and of food reserves, such as marrow bones..." Howley [ibid] additionally notes that the Beothuk "...were well aware that [the taking of objects] was strongly disliked by the settlers..." Alternatively, since the Beothuk may have been well aware that the settlers were upset by the missing objects, it may have been a sign of bravery to sneak into a white man's camp and cut loose expensive barges (Peyton 1987:35) or take a trifle as a sign of contempt.

Another question related to the previous section must be addressed. Essentially it inquires into the extinction of the Beothuk and the reason behind it. One popular theory (Peyton 1987; Winter 1977) holds that it was the Europeans who were at fault, and that because of the ruthless nature of the European colonists the Beothuk were slaughtered and eventually wiped out. Although crimes were committed by both sides, as indicated previously, it was not the direct fault of the Europeans that the Beothuk came to die out. More, it was an indirect effect of the European incursion into traditional Beothuk hunting and trapping grounds that finished them off. I will now explore the notion that the Beothuk starved to death as a result of loosing their traditional hunting grounds, a survey of the available literature equally supports this claim as well as that of cultural genocide!

Part Two: Hunger Pains in a Cold Forest

Shanawdithit provides the first clue as to the fate of her people. Bishop Inglis during interviews on 2 July 1827 with Shanawdithit recorded information to the effect that she was "...fearful that her race had died from want of food..." (Peyton 1987:85,89). This fact is borne out by some observations that William Epps Cormack made during his journey into the interior during the spring of 1827. Cormack (1828:6) identified that the birch and fir trees in the area had been "rinded." Rinding refers to the removal of the interior surface of the bark, usually as a source of food. Concerning the Beothuk (Rowe 1977:76,77), the use of rind for food was only done in times of starvation. Although this point was not arrived at by Cormack during his travels, it can be inferred from the evidence. The value of certain assertions made by James Thoms (1967:231) have been called into question, specifically his claim that anywhere from 3,000 to 50,000 Beothuk inhabited Newfoundland historically, a high number of people to support by hunting and gathering in such a restricted area. It is probably true that the Native population did decrease rather drastically after the white settlers arrived, and his further claim that many may have died because of starvation (1967:231) is supported by the observations and work of other people.

Winter (1975:81) highlights further testimony offered by Shanawdithit who indicated that she has witnessed,

"...disease and starvation pursue those who has escaped the trappers bullet. she has seen babies die because their mothers could no longer provide them with nourishment. She has seen old men and women die because they refused food so that the younger ones might live..."

As has been previously noted in this paper Winter's accounts of events appear to have been dramatized in order to evoke an emotional response, so the value such statements must be based on the collaboration of other evidence. Winter (1975:82) further proposes that in 1823 starvation had become so bad that the members of Shanawdithit's family were entering areas they knew to be inhabited by white settlers and as a result they died; in the case of her uncle and cousin, shot by two trappers, lost hunting in the case of herself, her younger sister, and her mother. Thoms (1967:236) relates that the three women were crying Boochauwit (I am hungry) before they gave themselves up to William Cull, a man noted for his ferocity to the Natives. The last claim can at least be verified (the capture, not the statement). Oswalt (1966:72) claims that Shanawdithit revealed to Peyton Junior that there were only fifteen people remaining:

"...two of whom were shot by trappers, one drowned, and the three women, including the informant, surrendered themselves to the whites. The remaining nine apparently died in the winter of 1824-1825..."

This claim cannot be verified and Oswalt gives no references for this piece of information that does not appear in any other account of the time. Additionally, Oswalt (1966:72) indicates that in subsequent years of 1824 and 1826, Indians, probably Micmac, reported having seen "Red Indians" or recent signs of them. Ciormack's
(1828:3) records that he identified evidence of Beothuk activity in areas he visited that indicated occupation as recent as the fall of 1826. If this is true we might assume that an isolated group still survived or perhaps that Shanawdithit may have underestimated the numbers of her people in order to protect them. Speck (1922:48) relates a story about a Micmac hunter who, many years ago, stumbled upon an old Beothuk camp where it was believed that the last Beothuk starved to death during a severe winter. This story is not collaborated by a date or a location for the village so the information remains of questionable value. We shall probably never know the validity of this piece of evidence or that of any other for that matter.

If indeed it was starvation that was the main culprit in the death of the Beothuk culture we should ask how it came about. This point is easier for us to consider for it seems that the majority of writers agree in one predominant reason. It is most likely that the Beothuk were pushed off their traditional hunting and trapping grounds by the Europeans from one coast and rival Indian nations from the other (Peyton 1987:3.20). They were frightened away from the coasts and the rivers into the interior of the island where the resources were not sufficient to sustain them through the cruel winters they had to endure.

It is entirely possible that even if Cormack (1828) could have persuaded his guide to take him closer to the traditional Beothuk wintering area at Red Indian Lake he would not have met any Beothuk. Shanawdithit (Rowe 1977:71) described the rapid disintegration her people underwent after the death of Nonosbawsut "...the Beothuk remnants, by the winter of 1823, had forsaken their traditional habitats around the lake..." This was probably one of the chief instruments of their demise. Again, we must look to an indirect European cause for the abandonment of the lake. Rowe (1977:106) indicates that the most serious confrontations between the Indians and the Europeans took place on the mainland, "...and centre around Beothuk wigwams, either summer ones near the coast, usually at the mouth of a salmon stream, or winter homes on the Exploits River and Red Indian Lake..." These are the areas that the Indians began to avoid, essentially all the areas where they knew they could get food. The Beothuk depended on the same set of resources as did the Europeans. Unfortunately, the very places where the Beothuk needed to be during the summer months, along the coasts, and in the winter, along the rivers, were the favourite places for settlement by the European fishermen and colonists (Tuck 1971:25). It is a matter of record that inevitable conflicts soon arose between the two groups, and the Europeans with superior armaments were able to force the Beothuk to retreat, for most of the year, into the interior of the province. The Beothuk were unable to subsist through the year without access to the coast (Tuck 1971:25).

One additional factor that should be identified that is partly related to this topic of a physiological deterioration of the people through a lack of food, is the apparent increase of morbidity in the Beothuk population towards the end of their existence. All of the females that were captured during the 1810s and 1820s eventually died of tuberculosis and, at least in the cases of Shanawdithit's mother and younger sister, has contracted it before their capture (Rowe 1977:72; Winter 1975:87). Shanawdithit apparently showed some signs of suffering upon her capture (Rowe 1977:72; Winter 1975:74). The role of disease should not be underestimated in the death of the Beothuk but in this paper I am attempting to show that it was a contributing factor brought on by physical weakness achieved through a lack of proper nourishment and not as a primary causative factor.

What ever the reason, the Beothuk, for all intents and purposes, died as a people on 6 June 1829 with the death of Shanawdithit (Peyton 1987:97). In the next section of this paper, I will attempt to disprove that last statement. There is evidence and testimony from historical contemporaries of the events as well as that of modern day claimants who suggest that the Beothuk may have actually survived past 1829, perhaps not as a culture but as individuals who carried their heritage within them.

**Part Three: The Death of a Culture?**

The evidence that was hinted at includes archaeological studies of Beothuk artifacts which seem to indicate that they may have had some contact with the Eskimos of the Dorset culture historically and perhaps just prior to contact (Harp 1964:153; Oswalt 1966:68; Tuck 1971:25). Also there is evidence to suggest that contact and even marriage may have occurred between the Beothuk and the Inuit of Greenland (Speck 1922:65), marriage or interaction with Eskimos from Labrador (Jenness 1977:267), and perhaps even intermarriage with the Montagnais to the north and the Micmac to the south.

Perhaps the most important information relevant to this topic revolves around the woman named Santu. Santu is a woman that was found by Frank Speck in 1910 during a period of study (Speck 1922:55). The woman claims to be the daughter of a man who claimed that his tribe was exterminated, a reference to the Beothuk. Santu also claims that "...friendly relations were maintained with the Labrador Eskimos and Indians..." More important is the statement that follows (Speck 1922:65): "...some of her father's
people, she said, when dispersed, joined them..." If this is true it is quite possible that some Beothuk did manage to escape and perhaps as Jenness (1977:267) suggests "...one or two families..." The evidence which was presented by Santu included a puzzling reference to her father and his eating habits (Speck 1922:62): "...Flesh to be eaten was thrown into the fire and only partly roasted. Her father, she remembers, would eat little or no vegetal food, nor bread. His diet consisted mostly of half-roasted meat..." Upon first examination these traits could be seen to have some relation to those of the Eskimo who often consumed raw or lightly cooked meat in order to balance their nutrition deficient diet, raw or lightly cooked meat would be high in Vitamin C. However one should not look too deep into this piece of information it may just have been a case of personal preference.

One point that argues for Santu, who maintained that her father told her that his tribe had been wiped out by white men (Speck 1922:57), is that there "...was at this time in her statements no idea nor of gaining money of favour..." With noting to gain she really had no reason to lie. Speck (1922:55) also refers to an episode where he had the opportunity to discuss his findings with James P. Howley in 1914. Howley apparently expressed disbelief in Santu's validity. It is a shame that at the time no further efforts were made to gain information from Santu, information that might have erased some of Howley's doubt. Unfortunately, Santu passed away in 1919 so further studies were impossible. One important point to keep in mind is that according to Speck (1922:58) Santu was suffering from senility and her memory may not have been totally accurate regarding the facts of the case. Nevertheless she presents the most convincing case regarding the possible survival of some of the Beothuk people past 1829. It seems quite likely that some of the Beothuk may have married and moved outside of Newfoundland as has been suggested by Jenness (1977), Harp (1964), and Oswalt (1966). The focus of my paper will now shift to explore this possibility.

The histories are ripe with the claim that the Beothuk were at war with the Micmac (Jenness 1977:266). Peyton (1987:3) indicates that there were two tribes of Micmac "...the Shaunamuncs (Montagnais from Labrador), a friendly tribe, and the Shannocs (from Cape Breton), a tribe hated and feared by the Beothuk..." if this is the truth then it can be assumed any interaction carried out with the Micmac were the Shaunamuncs. Oswalt (1966:67) on the other hand stipulates that the Beothuk were on friendly terms with the Montagnais and the Micmac; and not at all friendly with some segments of the Eskimo population. Both stories claim the Beothuk were not friendly with two different peoples, they both agree or at least mention that the Beothuk had good relations with the Montagnais, and implicitly in both accounts is the belief that trade was established among the different parties (Oswalt 1966:67; Peyton 1987:3).

Many stories exist concerning how the Micmac were paid by the French to go after the Beothuk and money was paid for any heads retrieved. (this fact may account for the majority agreement in the literature that the Micmac and the Beothuk were not the best of friends). More likely, this is just English propaganda aimed at discrediting the French. There is no evidence to support this claim. Stories are given as to why the animosity grew between the Beothuk and the Micmac (the reader is referred to Speck 1922:27-29). Rowe (1977:37,38) mentions that a contemporary of the time Aaron Thomas, in 1793, managed to confuse the Beothuk with the Eskimos "... to the point of attributing to the former most of the habits and skills of the latter..." This raises an interesting question with regards to Santu’s father who may have exhibited some preference for Inuit dietary habits (if one interprets the information as such) could this have been an honest mistake, or indeed could the Beothuk have been closely related in habit and custom to the Eskimo as has been shown through archaeological evidence? (Tuck 1971:24). Rowe (1977:38) also relates to us that Aaron Thomas never interacted with natives of Newfoundland or Labrador and his journals are ripe with inaccuracies and plain mistakes.

The archaeological evidence for prior occupation of the island by other cultures has been established (Tuck 1971). At least three successions have occurred a Paleo-Indian culture, the Newfoundland Dorset Eskimo culture, and Beothuk culture (Tuck 1971:18). It has also been established that the Beothuk maintained cordial relations with at least a few of the neighbouring nations around Newfoundland (Harp 1964:152; Jenness 1977:267; Speck 1922:65; Winter 1975:2). It is therefore possible if not probable that some Beothuk left the island and married into tribes on the mainland. Thoms (1967:237) relates a story about a woman named Mrs. Richard White "...who says that her grandfather, Joe Gabriel, was the son a full-blooded Beothuk who married a Micmac girl..." This is one of the more likely scenarios. However, no reference for this information is given although the name of a town and the woman’s name are offered in the article, and presumably could be followed up if the woman is not deceased. What the whole situation boils down to is how likely is it that Beothuk married into other nations. Although there is no universally accepted documented proof that this happened, the available evidence does seem to support that it was at least likely and may have occurred.
Part Four: A Brief Reexamination and Conclusion

To address the claim posed at the beginning of the paper concerning the malevolence or benevolence on the part of the Europeans towards the Beothuk, I have demonstrated that neither extreme was the case or that both were. Both the Beothuk and the Europeans acted rashly and at some times hastily towards one another. Each was in part responsible for the actions of the other. The Europeans should have expected retaliation from the Indians as a result of the capture of Demasduit (Peyton 1987:42, 43; Rowe 1977:62; Winter 1975:54), or the frequent shootings in the bush that most likely occurred (the reader is referred to the previous citations). If the reports about Indian actions against the settlers are accurate, the five men being murdered (Peyton 1987:7) and the two marines being murdered (the Buchan expedition, Winter 1975:33-36) and as Howley suggests (1974:96) the Indians were well aware that their actions upset the settlers, then the Indians are also at fault. In almost every case involving a death it was a misunderstanding on the part of one or both of the parties involved. Language was a very major barrier in these situations as it was almost impossible for each to understand one another this may have been the ultimate cause of the problems but that analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

Another factor that must be taken into account is the starvation the Indians suffered as an indirect result of the European incursions. As has been previously noted Rowe (1977:71) indicates that Shanawdithit claims her people left the area of Red Indian Lake after the death of Nonosbawsut. This action on the part of the Beothuk was one contributing factor to their eventual demise, for leaving the area also meant leaving traditional winter hunting and trapping grounds. Indeed they had been attacked many times here and the possibility it could happen again was high so they left. This coupled by the fact that they were forced inland during the summer hunting season by the Europeans on one side and the Micmac on the other side (Peyton 1987:3,20) effectively destroyed their subsistence patterns involving a seasonal round.

The result of this, inevitably, was starvation on a very large scale—starvation that may have turned out to be the chief assailant of the Beothuk and not direct involvement of the Europeans, although it can be said that the Europeans caused the starvation and are ultimately responsible for it. However, the evidence does not support a direct correlation and the only relation would be inferential. Cormack (1828:6), Rowe (1977:76,77), and Thoms (1967:231) have all identified evidence which supports the contention that the Beothuk underwent a drastic depopulation due to extreme starvation, most likely during the winter of 1824-1825. This evidence foreshadowed the inevitable future.

Finally, it is quite possible that the Beothuk died only as a visible culture in 1829 and not as a People. Evidence in the form of claimants to Beothuk ancestry have been found (Speck 1922:55, in reference to Santu. And Thoms 1967:237, in reference to Mrs. Richard White). Even if these claimants are false inferential evidence concerning the intermingling of culture in the area may be true. From testimony (Speck 1922:65), interpretation of the data (Jenness 1977:267), and archaeological evidence (Harp 1964:153; Oswalt 1966:68; Tuck 1971:25) it can be shown that relations may have occurred between the Beothuk and the Dorset Eskimo, the Montagnais, and the Micmac, marriages most likely did occur, and that it is entirely possible some families managed to leave Newfoundland before the starvation claimed them (Jenness 1977:267).

Part Five: Further Comments

I have had an ambitious goal for this paper; to provide an answer for the question “what happened to the Beothuk?” Several things have become evident to me during the research for this paper. First of all, there simply is not much information on this subject. The information that is easily available consists of several obviously biased books of questionable validity. One author is often seen to contradict his or her fellows and on frequent occasion advance un-referenced claims that, in some cases, bely common sense (the reader is encouraged to pursue the three different accounts of the Hant Harbour massacre or the three different accounts of the capture of Demasduit, both previously cited in this paper). The trick has been to identify the areas of consistency and correlate the different accounts. Where this has been difficult or impossible, information has been presented in order that the reader be able to make his or her own determination about the validity of the facts.

Although this paper cannot offer much in the way of new information I hope that this interpretation has provided some new ideas and offered some new directions for further research.

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