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978-1-10742-562-0 - The Beothucks or Red Indians: The Aboriginal Inhabitants of Newfoundland

James P. Howley

Frontmatter

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Reproduction from description of the picture painted for Governor Holloway in 1808, which was to be shown to the native Indians—Beothucks,—and which it was hoped would be the means of bringing about friendly relations with them.—By John W. Hayward.

THE BEOTHUCKS OR RED INDIANS

THE ABORIGINAL INHABITANTS OF NEWFOUNDLAND

BY

JAMES P. HOWLEY, F.G.S.

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PREFACE

FOR the past forty years I have endeavoured to gather, from every available source, all possible information bearing upon this subject. After a minute study of every detail obtainable, I have come to the conclusion that at this distance of time, with such meagre material as we possess, it would be utterly out of the question to attempt to write an accurate history of the aborigines of this island.

All that can be aimed at now is to gather together the various disjointed and disconnected references to those people that have appeared from time to time in print, arrange these in some sort of consecutive order, and relate the numerous traditions, anecdotes, etc., current amongst the fisher-folk, that I have gathered, and which have been preserved and handed down from generation to generation.

From this chaotic mass of material, I shall endeavour to sift as much of the truth as possible, and finally make such corrections as are deemed necessary, or offer such solutions of points in the narrations as seem to require explanation. Modern research in ethnological studies affords much new light upon such subjects, which was entirely beyond the reach of the earlier writers.

I am fully aware that all my efforts must still fall very short in many respects, and that there are probably, numerous unrelated traditions which have not come under my notice. I can only claim that I have used my best endeavours to preserve from oblivion, the principal facts relating to this interesting but unfortunate section of the human family.

I had long since intended publishing the result of these enquiries but various circumstances interposed to prevent my doing so, not the least of which was the hope that at any moment some additional or important fact might come within my reach; furthermore, I had cherished the hope of being able to trace certain documents known to have been in existence, but in this I have been but partially successful.

Every individual who was supposed to possess any information whatever, bearing on the subject, has been either interviewed or written to, with the view of making the work as complete as possible. Needless to say, much that has been so acquired is of a very dubious character. Fully

half of it referred to the same events as occurring to different individuals, at different times and places. It was no easy task to sift all these divergent stories, eliminate what was useless or unreliable, and get at the actual facts in each case.

It was my good fortune in the beginning of these researches to meet with a few intelligent persons, who had come into actual contact with some of the aborigines during their lifetime, and from whom the most valuable information was obtained. It would be unimportant to enumerate all the persons, but I cannot refrain from mentioning the more reliable authorities, whose authenticity is beyond question.

My old friend, the late John Peyton, Magistrate of Twillingate, his wife, and his son Thomas, were, without exception, the best informed persons of modern times, in fact, they were a fund in themselves from whence was obtained the most direct and trustworthy references in my possession. It was John Peyton who captured the Red Indian woman, called Mary March, in 1819, and in whose house another female, called Nancy, lived for several years after her capture in 1823. The widow Jure, of Exploits Island, who also resided in Peyton's house at the same time as Nancy, was a valuable informant. She not only gave me most minute particulars of the appearance and characteristics of the Beothuck woman, but having acquired some knowledge of their language, was able to pronounce, faultlessly, several words for me, which gave a clue to its phonetics which could not be otherwise obtained.

The late Rev. Phillip Tocque, author of a book on Newfoundland, entitled *Wandering Thoughts*, in which appeared an engraving of Mary March, kindly furnished me with full particulars of the source from whence the picture originated, and which was in every way authentic.

Another Anglican clergyman, the Rev. Silas T. Rand, of Hansport, Nova Scotia, well versed in the Micmac language, and author of a Micmac dictionary, related some interesting traditions of that people about the Newfoundland Indians.

Prof. Latham, an eminent English Ethnologist, who made a careful study of the Beothuck vocabulary, furnished me with a copy of his notes and comments thereon.

The late Sir William Dawson, Principal of McGill University, Montreal, was another gentleman to whom I am indebted in this connection.

But perhaps, above all others, my thanks are due to Prof. Albert S. Gatschet, of the Ethnological Bureau of Washington, for the most minute study and analysis of all the Beothuck vocabularies that have come to light. A correspondence, extending over several years, was kept up with this last named gentleman, who became very much absorbed in this, to him, entirely

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new dialect, and in the manners and customs of this strange people, so unlike in many respects, those of the inhabitants of the mainland of the N. American continent. It was a revelation to him to find so much new material to work upon, of which he was previously unaware. From the moment I sent him the first instalment of the vocabulary, his interest in the subject was unceasing, and he kept constantly urging me to hunt up further information, while he, himself, set to work in his own sphere, and succeeded in unearthing much that was inaccessible to me. I had the good fortune to meet this gentleman in Washington in 1885, and had a long and most interesting conversation with him. He subsequently published several pamphlets bearing upon the ethnological and linguistic relations of this most interesting tribe.

Altogether, several vocabularies were obtained from various sources, some of them being mere copies of each other, made at different times, and by different individuals, yet each one contained a few additional words, or gave a different rendering of many terms. As might be expected this was the cause of much perplexity, nevertheless, by a most careful comparison of all the vocabularies, Mr Gatschet was enabled, in most cases, to cull out the errors and rectify the mistakes.

Unfortunately none of these vocabularies were extensive or of sufficient range to prove entirely satisfactory. Owing to the numerous copyists' and typographical errors in all of them, the task of unravelling them must have been a very difficult one. As however, we can never hope to add to our knowledge on this head now, the elucidation at the hands of such an eminent authority as Mr Gatschet can scarcely ever be looked for again. In its proper place I shall give, in full, the results of his investigations and the conclusions he arrived at.

More or less information was obtained from the Curators of the Bristol, Edinburgh, and British Museums, and from a host of private individuals too numerous to mention. In fact no possible or probable source that held out the remotest chance of affording any light on the subject was neglected.

There is one circumstance in connection with these researches I shall ever regret. I was not aware until the notice of his death appeared some thirty-eight years ago, that the philanthropic gentleman, Mr W. E. Cormack, was, for many years previous, residing at New Westminster, British Columbia. Perhaps this noble-hearted individual possessed a more intimate knowledge of the Beothucks than any other person living in recent times. He threw himself heart and soul into the attempt to ameliorate their hapless condition in the early part of the last century. He made two daring excursions into the then unknown interior, in the hope of finding or communicating with them, but alas! it was too late! they had ceased to exist, and so far

as we know with certainty, the last survivor, Shanawdithit (Nancy), was then residing with the Peyton family at Exploits Island. Cormack had her brought to St John's, after his return from his last expedition, and during the short remainder of her life, obtained from her many valuable and interesting facts relative to the history, etc., of her tribe. We have evidence of this from the few stray notes and references, in his handwriting, that have been preserved.

It would be inconceivable that an educated man like Cormack, who had evinced such a marked, aye, even enthusiastic interest in this unfortunate race, should have neglected the opportunity afforded him, during several months' close contact with Shanawdithit, to question her closely on all matters relating to the history and traditions of her people. He had then an opportunity such as never occurred before, as by this time the woman had acquired a very fair knowledge of the English language, in which she could make herself clearly understood. She was a full-grown woman when captured, and must have been well informed on all that pertained to her people. That Cormack published somewhere, the fullest particulars of all he learned from Shanawdithit, is several times hinted at in his manuscripts, but all my efforts to trace these have utterly failed.

Since then all chance of ascertaining anything further upon this, to me, most absorbing topic seems hopeless, it remains only to give the result of my researches to the public in as connected a form as possible, adding such comments or explanations as my own observations in the interior, during so many years, may enable me to offer.

JAMES P. HOWLEY.

August 1914.

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INTRODUCTION

“The proper study of mankind is man.”—POPE.

WITH the many theories that have been advanced from time to time to account for the peopling of this vast Western Continent, by learned persons of historical and ethnological celebrity, I shall not attempt to grapple. I shall confine myself merely to a general *résumé* of such as bear the appearance of plausibility, and leave to others to draw their own conclusions therefrom.

The most generally accepted theory, and that which was held for a long time, is the supposition that the nomadic tribes of human beings found here by the first European explorers, must have originally crossed over from the Asiatic Continent, by way of Behring Strait, or the Aleutian Islands. Many circumstances seemed to lend colour to this theory. A great resemblance existed, both in customs and manners, between the inhabitants of the Asiatic Steppes and the American Indians; but subsequent investigations, and the light that modern ethnological science has brought to bear on this great question, seems to have considerably shaken this belief.

Others again hold, that as in comparatively recent geologic times, there is much evidence pointing to the existence of a continuous, or almost continuous, land barrier, extending across the northern region of the globe, connecting the eastern and western hemispheres, that possibly the immigration was in reality from Europe, and not from Asia.

That ingenuous writer, Ignatius Donnelly, in his story of the lost “Atlantis,” has propounded the theory, that a great continent heretofore occupied the centre of the Atlantic Ocean, peopled by a numerous and advanced race of the human family, that during some great cataclysmic disturbance, this land entirely disappeared, becoming submerged in the bosom of Mother Ocean, leaving behind merely a few outlying fragments to show that it once existed¹. He holds that prior to its destruction emigration took place, both in an eastern and western direction, and that the inhabitants of at least central America and southern Europe had their origin from this source. Far-fetched as this theory may appear at first sight, there are circumstances surrounding it which would seem to give some colour to its probability. We know that a tradition long held place amongst certain European and African nations, notably amongst the Greeks, Egyptians and Phoenicians, of the existence of this mysterious continent.

¹ On one of the islands of the Azores, supposed to be a remnant of this “Atlantis,” a life sized equestrian statue, in bronze, was found on the top of a mountain.—James Stanier Clarke.

In two of Plato's dialogues, namely, *The Timaeus*, and *The Critias*, he relates how Solon, a learned Athenian, travelling in Egypt, fell in with an Egyptian priest, a man of profound knowledge, who related to him that in times past, "All the western regions of Europe onward to Tyrrhenia, and of northern Africa including Lybia and Egypt, had been over-run and taken possession of by a people of redoubtable power, starting from the bosom of the Atlantic Sea. They came from a land facing the Herculaen Strait (Gibraltar), being a territory larger than Asia and Lybia in one? Between this country and that strait," said the narrator, "there were several other but smaller islands. This Atlantean region was governed by a confederation of sovereigns. We, all of us," he said, "were enslaved by these Atlanteans, until the fleets of Athens defeated them and set us free. Yet," he continued, "a far greater evil befell them not long afterwards, for their land sank in the ocean, and thus a vast country, larger than all Europe and Asia together? disappeared in the twinkling of an eye¹."

Again it is related of Himilcon, a Carthaginian rover, about the year 356 of Rome, that having ventured outside the "Pillars of Hercules" (Straits of Gibraltar) he was driven far to sea, and fell upon the new continent of "Atlantis," where he found a people well advanced in the arts and of a high degree of civilization, etc. Hamilcar and his people described the land they visited as "spacious and fertile, having great resources and magnificent forests." "The attractions of the country tempted part of his crew to settle there, and the rest returning to Carthage, and its Senate being apprised confidentially, of the discovery, and dreading its effect upon the people of Carthage, whom they feared might emigrate thereto, decided to bury the event in oblivion, by causing all who knew of it to be secretly put to death."

These traditions so universally cherished, in Europe and Africa, seem to have been the foundation for many subsequent expeditions in search of the mythical "Islands of the Blest," the "Seven Cities," the island of "St Brendan," etc., and the knowledge thereof may even have been the incentive which animated the breast of Columbus himself, in his search for new continents.

The latest theory, however, with regard to the peopling of America, and one that is gaining much ground amongst advanced thinkers, is that its inhabitants really originated on this continent, in fact, some would incline to the belief that it was the cradle of the human race itself.

What elements of truth may be contained in each or all of those theories, it is not my intention now to enquire into.

It is a pretty well established fact that the earliest European inhabitants, the so-called "Cave Men," bore a striking resemblance in anatomical structure, in the form of their rude implements of bone and stone, and in their skill in carving, to the Eskimos of the extreme northern regions of the globe. So much so, that Prof. Boyd Dawkins, in his valuable treatise on *Early Man in Britain*, believes them to be identical, or nearly so. This ancient race, known as the Mongolian type of man, includes some of the

¹ This latter statement refutes itself in as much, that the Atlantic Ocean could not hold so great a land area, unless, indeed, "Atlantis" were joined to the American Continent.

Introduction

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oldest civilized nations of the earth, especially the Chinese and Japanese. We have seen within recent times to what a height of advancement the latter people were capable of developing. Their struggle with the powerful Russian Empire has placed them in the van of modern nations in the arts of peace and war.

As already stated, the geologic conditions of our globe during the latter stages of the Post-Pliocene period, when it was supposed man first made his appearance, were such, that the land comprising the two great continents of Europe and America must have approached, in their northern latitudes, much nearer than they do to-day, if indeed they did not actually unite. It is not unreasonable therefore to imagine that these nomadic wanderers, whose remains prove them to have roamed over vast areas, spread themselves eastward and westward, from whatever centre they originated, over the whole northern part of our hemisphere. They were apparently accompanied in their migrations by many inferior animals, some long extinct, others like the Mastodon, and the Elephant known to have existed on this continent only by their fossil remains being occasionally exhumed from the soil. That a people contemporary with these animals inhabited America is attested from the fact that the "Mound Builders," whoever they may have been? represented the elephant most perfectly in the form of a gigantic mound of earth found in Wisconsin, also on carved stone pipes from some of their tumuli. It was their congeners in Europe who so faithfully represented another huge extinct mammal, the Mammoth, in carvings on the tusk of the animal itself. To this day the Eskimos of Labrador are very expert carvers and fabricators of bone ornaments, being a most ingenious people in many other respects.

May we not suppose then that this same race of people who showed by their earliest efforts the possession of much innate genius would under favourable climatic and other conditions develop a degree of culture and civilization in America, akin to that attained by the Chinese and Japanese in Asia. Might not the "Mound Builders" of the Mississippi Valley, the temple builders of central and southern America, represent higher and higher forms of development of this same race? It is an established fact that the few skeletons and fragmentary remains, discovered in the altar and temple mounds of these earlier inhabitants of America, bear a strong resemblance to the Eskimo in structure.

The eminent American poet, and author, William Cullen Bryant, in his *Popular History of the United States*, says, "Man is older on other continents than was till quite recently supposed. If older elsewhere, he may, by parity of reasoning, be older here. We are permitted to go behind the Indians in looking for the earliest inhabitants of North America, where-ever they may have come from, or whenever they may have lived."

Again, he says, "But behind these Indians who were in possession of the country when it was discovered by Europeans, is dimly seen the shadowy form of another people who have left many remarkable evidences of their habits and customs, and of a singular degree of civilization, but who many centuries ago disappeared, either exterminated by pestilence, or

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by some powerful and pitiless enemy, or driven from the country to seek new homes south and west of the Gulf of Mexico."

Squier says, speaking of the "Mound Builders," "Their pottery far exceeded anything of which the existing Indian tribes are known to have been capable."

At some remote period, undefinable as to date, swarms of more savage and more warlike hordes seem to have come upon and overwhelmed the "Mound Builders." From whence these latter originated there is nothing known with certainty. If, as conjectured, they were an influx from the Asiatic continent, or otherwise, it is very clear they soon overran the northern portion of America. No doubt their numbers were augmented from time to time by fresh arrivals following in the footsteps of the first intruders. They quickly dispersed their less savage and more peace-loving predecessors, and pushing them back step by step, possessed themselves of the territory. The original inhabitants were driven to seek safety first towards the eastern sea-board, and when dislodged from there, finally retreated to the cold, inhospitable, northern regions, where they found rest and retirement for a time from their relentless foes. It is easy to suppose that during this long and harassing retreat, they were likely to relapse into much of their original barbarism, and lose all tradition of the height of civilization to which they once attained.

It must have taken a great series of years for the new-comers to have spread themselves over the entire continent, and occupy even the outlying islands in such numbers as we find them on the arrival of the first European explorers, but it is doubtful if their occupancy of our island dated much further back than Cabot's discovery. If we are to accept the Icelandic traditions of a pre-Columbian discovery of America, and there seems no adequate reason to doubt their genuineness, we find it recorded that those daring sea-rovers at first met with no sign of inhabitants on the coast, and when at length they did come in contact with human beings, they describe them as of diminutive stature (Skrealings or dwarfs), dark and swarthy in complexion, clad in (fishes) seal (?) -skin robes, paddling skin canoes, etc. Could these be other than Eskimos? The question of the actual site of the Norse discovery and attempt at settlement being still an open one, we can only conjecture either, that they were speaking of the people of Labrador, or at that time the Eskimos, if not a fixed inhabitant of more southern latitudes, must have ranged along the coast much further south than in latter times.

The traditional enmity which existed between the Beothucks and the Eskimo, or for that matter, between all the Indian tribes of the surrounding territories and the latter, proves pretty conclusively there could be no kinship between them. Every man's hand appears to have been raised against the unfortunate Eskimo; they were, and still are, the prey of all the neighbouring tribes. It is known that the Beothucks entertained a special dislike for them, and in derision, designated them "the four-paws," presumably owing to their animal-like appearance and propensities.

It is not at all likely that two peoples bearing such antipathy for each other could have co-existed on the sea-board for any length of time. We

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may, therefore, assume that at the time of the Icelandic discovery, the so-called Red Indians of Newfoundland had not yet reached the eastern shores of the continent, or at least, had not come into possession of this island, their future home. We may conceive then that subsequent to the Norse discoveries, and preceding the arrival of Columbus and the Cabots, the nomadic savages from the north-western territories came upon the scene, and dislodged the Eskimos, only in turn to be driven out themselves by subsequent arrivals of still more powerful tribes who pressed upon them from the rear.

On the authority of the late Sir Wm Dawson, Principal of McGill University, Montreal, a tradition existed amongst the Micmac tribe of Nova Scotia, that a previous people occupied that territory whom the Micmacs drove out, and who were, probably, allied to the Tinné or Chippewan stock¹. These, he thinks, may have passed over to Newfoundland, and become the progenitors of the Beothucks. This supposition appears to me to carry with it a considerable amount of probability. Here, 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.

All this is, however, merely conjectural, and as there is now not the slightest probability of ever arriving at the real facts, it only remains for me to give, in consecutive order, the actual recorded history of this strange, mysterious race.

Following out Sir Wm Dawson's hint as to their probable derivation from the Tinné tribe, a branch of the great Chippewan family, we will next enquire what other authorities have to say on this head.

Professor Latham, the distinguished English Ethnologist, who made a close study of the Beothuck vocabulary many years ago, affirms that the "Beothucks were Algonkin, as opposed to Eskimo, and as Algonkins, they were not a mere branch of the Micmacs, Scoffies, and the like, of the main continent. They were members of a division of their own,—not a very distant one,—but still a separate one." Prof. Gatschet, however, does not agree with this view. He says, "The language proves that they were entirely 'sui generis.'" "It is a mistaken idea," he adds, "that the Beothucks are a branch of the Algonkin family yet they certainly were not the autochthons of the island." There are some writers who advanced the theory that these people may have derived their origin from a remnant of the Norsemen who attempted colonization in the tenth century, but this latter supposition has been long since disposed of. They were Indians of the typical continental type, though undoubtedly distinct in many respects from any of their near neighbours. Under all the circumstances surrounding this mysterious tribe, we must only fall back upon the suggestion of Sir Wm Dawson, as the most plausible theory to account for their presence here.

The real historic records of the Beothucks begin with the re-discovery of America in the latter part of the fifteenth century. When Columbus made his successful voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, thereby dispelling

¹ Mr Albert S. Gatschet does not agree with this conclusion.

all those gloomy terrors which this "Sea of Darkness" held for the ancient mariners, other venturesome spirits, seeking fame for themselves, and fired by a laudable desire to acquire some share in the rich spoils of this wonderful "El Dorado," for their own nations, were not long in following in his wake. Foremost among these were the Cabots, father and son, who, starting from England, and keeping a more northerly course, fell upon the coasts of Labrador and Newfoundland. It is not my intention to touch upon the much disputed question as to which of those lands Cabot first sighted. It will be sufficient to state, that he undoubtedly saw this Island, and also touched upon the main continent at least a year before Columbus sighted it.

The accounts of the Cabot discoveries are of such a meagre description, and are, moreover, so conflicting and unreliable in most respects, that we can cull very little from them that is really trustworthy, consequently, their references to the people met with on these shores, might apply to any of the inhabitants from Cape Chidley to Florida, all of which great extent of coastline the Cabots were known to have explored. We can only infer, then, from certain remarks attributed to them, by contemporary writers, and from other subsequently ascertained facts, how much may really refer to the Beothucks of Newfoundland.

It would appear that on the first voyage, curious as it may seem, they did not meet with any inhabitants at all, but had ample proof of their existence by finding, in several places, felled trees, snares for entrapping game, also some spear and arrow heads. It is highly probable that the Indians seeing Cabot's ships manned by pale-faced beings, and other indications of a supposed supernatural character, fled at their approach, and hid themselves in the woods and fastnesses.

But we will now leave it to the historians and biographers to relate the subsequent history of the poor benighted aborigines of this island. It is an unique story, and has no exact parallel in other parts of the American continent. The Beothucks were found here by the Cabots on the discovery of the island, and for nearly three and a half centuries continued to occupy this oldest British colony, living in their primitive ignorance and barbarism, under our vaunted civilization, not altogether unknown, but unheeded and uncared for, until this same civilization blotted them out of existence. It is a dark page in the history of British colonization in America, and contrasts very unfavourably with that of the French nation in Canada and the Acadian provinces, where the equally barbarous savages were treated with so much consideration, that they are still to be met with in no inconsiderable numbers, and in a very appreciable condition of civilization and advancement.