

Christopher Patrick Aylward, *Beothuk: How Story Made a People (Almost) Disappear*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2024. 312 pages. ISBN 9780228022039. \$44.95 hardcover.

A land acknowledgement commonly heard in Newfoundland has always startled me. It begins in the standard way: "We respectfully acknowledge the land on which we live as the ancestral homelands of the Beothuk," but then it continues almost vehemently, "whose culture has been lost forever and can never be recovered." I find the statement's finality jarring. While most land acknowledgements are meant to recognize Indigenous sovereignty, this one seems to rule it out completely.

The erasure of the Beothuk has long served as a central theme in Newfoundland cultural history. Numerous books, poems, films, theatre productions, and exhibits tell the tragic story of a shy, peaceful, and isolated people who were violently exterminated by European settlers and Mi'kmaw mercenaries. Unable to withstand encroaching colonization, Beothuk families withdrew to the interior of the island, where their numbers dwindled. When the captive, Shanawdithit, died in 1829, she was commemorated as the last survivor.

In recent years, scholars and Indigenous leaders have re-examined this narrative and drawn our attention to settler colonial fantasies, Indigenous interrelationships, and Beothuk agency and survival strategies. Some even dispute the claim of extinction. "That's the biggest myth has ever been played in Newfoundland, and is still being played, that the Beothuk people are extinct," the former Chief of the Miawpukek First Nation, Mi'sel Joe, has argued. "They're not. They're still around. They're here in Conne River. They're in Flat Bay. They're in Grand Falls, in all parts of Newfoundland...[Beothuk] were taken in. They were married, men, women. And in that case, they're still around" (p. 150).

Christopher Aylward explores this contested narrative in his new book, *Beothuk: How Story Made a People (Almost) Disappear*. A Newfoundland settler with a life-long fascination with Beothuk history, Aylward has spent decades exploring the literature and debates about the Indigenous group. The book, based on his 2014 PhD thesis, examines how historical European narratives, scholarly literature, and Mi'kmaw oral histories have shaped, challenged, and changed the Beothuk story over time. Starting with early Norse, French, and British accounts and then focusing specifically on two concurrent but conflicting scholarly works, Aylward meticulously analyzes European descriptions, biases, and interpretations of Beothuk history and society. As he shows, the early European reports created themes of inevitable Beothuk extinction, failure, and passivity that weave their way through subsequent research. James P. Howley's 1915 book, *The Beothucks or Red Indians: The Aboriginal Inhabitants of Newfoundland*, and many other historical and archaeological accounts echo these ideas. However, the far less influential work by anthropologist Frank Speck, *Beothuk and Micmac: Indian Notes and Monographs* (1922), presents an alternative narrative. Instead of relying solely on European sources, Speck consulted Mi'kmaq about their oral histories about the Beothuk. He relates their stories of friendly relationships between all the Indigenous peoples of the region, including Labrador Innu and Inuit. He also includes an account by Santu Toney, a woman who claimed to have Beothuk ancestry. When he met her in Gloucester, Massachusetts in 1910, Santu told him that her father, Joe Kop, was a "full-blood" Beothuk who had been raised by a Mi'kmaw family in Newfoundland.

Aylward also talked with Newfoundland Mi'kmaw residents, who voice their frustration about the negative representation of their people in historical narratives. Instead of being the enemies of the Beothuk, many Mi'kmaq recount stories from Elders about intermarriage between

the two groups. They argue that the ideas of Beothuk “extinction” and Mi’kmaq brutality ignore their expertise and erase the existence of Beothuk ancestry within Mi’kmaq families. As Scott Garnier says, “As a culture, materially, linguistically, the Beothuk are extinct. With regard to bloodline, no, definitely not. The Beothuk are alive and well among us” (p. 150). Some are also hoping that recent efforts to analyze Beothuk DNA will help them trace links to living ancestors. The contentious use of DNA in establishing indigeneity is presented in the book without much context or comment – Aylward’s intent seems to be simply to explore people’s interpretations of extinction. However, the various social differentiations that relate to extinction, including race, culture, and DNA/blood, are used almost interchangeably, so an analytical framework would help the reader more fully understand different interpretations.

Beothuk: How Story Made a People (Almost) Disappear provides a thorough survey of historical narratives about Beothuk and incorporates fascinating contemporary Indigenous counter-narratives. While the book tends to tiptoe around political analysis of the role of historical narratives in settler colonial contexts, it will be a valuable resource for future researchers. Its synthesis of the vast scholarly Beothuk literature with testimony from Mi’kmaq, Innu, and those who claim Beothuk ancestry is a unique contribution that will undoubtedly prove useful for years to come.

Beothuk adds a range of voices to a subject that was recently explored in Fiona Polack’s edited volume, *Tracing Ochre: Changing Perspectives on the Beothuk* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018). Although Aylward authored two chapters in the book, he misses an opportunity in *Beothuk* to engage with his fellow scholars’ contributions to the field. Lianne Leddy’s insights into historical sources, Lisa Rankin’s contextualization of the changing archaeological approaches to Beothuk research, and the astute analysis about the political function of historical colonial narratives by Patrick Brantlinger, Jocelyn Thorpe, and Bonita Lawrence all develop academic arguments that are largely overlooked in *Beothuk*.

The settler fascination with the extinction narrative and the erasure of Indigenous Peoples underlies the Beothuk story and fuels both colonial racism and the settler desire for belonging. Aylward demonstrates the lasting power of this story, despite a century of counter-narratives and more nuanced ethnohistoric, Indigenous, and archaeological interpretations of Newfoundland history. For his research, he spoke extensively with Saqamaw Mi’sel Joe, a prominent Mi’kmaq leader who has a deep understanding of the importance of historical narratives. Over the past few years, Mi’sel Joe has worked to change the narrative himself by publishing two works of historical fiction with Sheila O’Neill aimed at reframing the relationship between Beothuk and Mi’kmaq peoples. Based on Mi’kmaq oral history, *My Indian* and its sequel, *Suliewey* (Breakwater Books, 2021 and 2023) relate the experiences of the historical figure, Sylvester Joe (Suliewey), a Mi’kmaq guide who was hired in 1822 by William Cormack to find Beothuk families in the interior of Newfoundland. The books tell the story from Suliewey’s perspective, highlighting his attempts to keep Cormack away from Beothuk encampments and underscoring the friendly and family relationships between the two Indigenous peoples.

In their own way, these works and *Beothuk: How Story Made a People (Almost) Disappear* aim to achieve similar goals – to unsettle colonial narratives and centre Indigenous interpretations about Beothuk history in Newfoundland. These efforts to challenge narratives of extinction are reconfiguring our understandings of history, and they are leading the public conversation about how best to live together on the ancestral homelands of the Beothuk.

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