

Debunking Common Misconceptions about the Beothuk

Based on *The Beothuk Story*. Film. Directed by Christopher Aylward. Zamura Films, 2022.

Settler society generally believes a number of lies about the Beothuk People of Newfoundland. The most common of these lies is that the last Beothuk person died in 1829, and therefore the group is “extinct.” The so-called leading expert on the Beothuk, settler scholar Dr. Ingeborg Marshall, helped create and spread these false narratives. This factsheet debunks the myth of Beothuk extinction and other common misconceptions about Indigenous Peoples in Newfoundland.

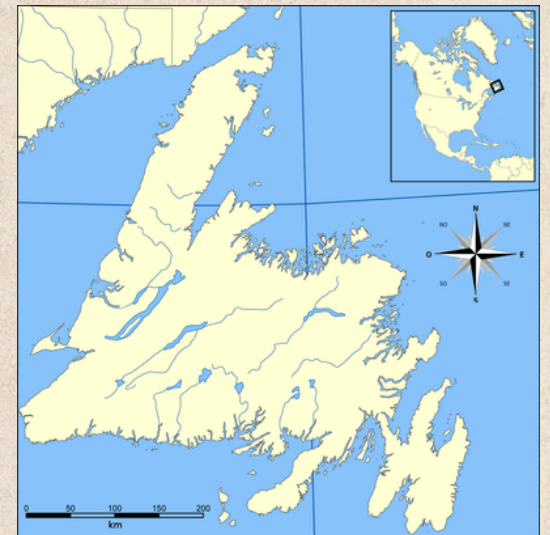
When and Where Does This History Begin?

The Myth

The history of Newfoundland begins with European explorer John Cabot’s landing on the island in 1497

The Facts

- The land currently known as Newfoundland has been the territory of the **Beothuk, Mi’kmaq, and Innu** since time immemorial.
- Archaeological studies conducted by the Innu-created Tshikapisk Foundation found evidence of Innu activity on the land dating as far back as 3,500 years ago, demonstrating their long connection to the land.
- Treating the arrival of Europeans on the land as a starting point of history makes Indigenous People invisible in historical memory (Anthony Jenkinson, Tshikapisk Foundation).



Newfoundland: territory of the Beothuk, Mi’kmaq, and Innu



Engraving depicting John Guy’s friendly trade encounter with the Beothuk in 1612.

Beothuk–European Relations

The Myth

After some initial friendly encounters, English fishers shot at the Beothuk in 1613 (Sitara). From then on, Beothuk–European relations were defined by hostility, and the Beothuk maintained a consistent policy of avoiding Europeans (Ingeborg Marshall).

The Facts

- One hostile interaction could not possibly have ended all friendly relations between the Beothuk and Europeans (Archaeologist William Gilbert).
- Archaeological evidence indicates that the Beothuk continued to interact with European fishers on the shores of Newfoundland in the seventeenth century.
- There were likely hundreds of friendly interactions between Beothuk and European fishers that did not get recorded because most fishermen were illiterate (Dr. Barry Gaulton, Memorial University).
- Seventeenth-century settlers requested beads from Europe to engage in trade with the Beothuk (Archaeologist William Gilbert).
- Settler men travelled to Beothuk villages and negotiated bride prices in order to marry Beothuk women (Rev. Dr. Lloyd Ryan).
- The extinction myth retroactively projects a narrative of constant Beothuk–European hostility into the past. Violence and hostility did occur, but Beothuk–European interactions were far more varied (Sitara).



Engraving depicting trade between Europeans and the Beothuk from 1808 (Sitara).

Beothuk–Mi'kmaq Relations

The Myths

- There was no intermarriage or prolonged interaction between the Mi'kmaq and Beothuk (Ingeborg Marshall).
- The Mi'kmaq only arrived in Newfoundland when Europeans brought them to massacre the Beothuk. They have no legitimate claim or long-standing connection to the land.

The Facts

- Archaeological evidence and oral history assert that there was intermarriage and cultural exchange between the Mi'kmaq and Beothuk on Newfoundland (Scott Garnier, Qalipu First Nation).
- The Mi'kmaq had settlements in Newfoundland long before European arrival, such as at Bottom Brook Pond, where they lived alongside the Beothuk.
- Denying long-standing Mi'kmaq connections to the land perpetuates the lie that there are no remaining Indigenous People with ties to Newfoundland.
- The Mi'kmaq word for the Beothuk, *Peta'kewaq*, translates to “friend up the river” in English, suggesting an amiable relationship between the two Nations (John Jeddore Jr., Miawpukek First Nation).
- Mi'kmaq legends portray close proximity and friendliness between the Mi'kmaq and Beothuk (Calvin White, Qalipu First Nation).
- There is little basis or logic to the claim that Mi'kmaq began killing the Beothuk (Dr. Scott Neilsen, Memorial University).

Beothuk–Innu Relations

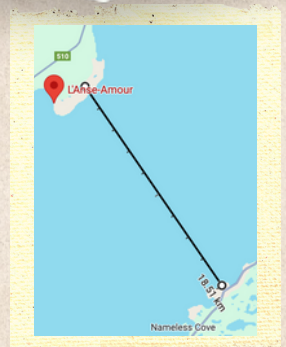
The Myth

The Beothuk were isolated from other Indigenous groups because they resided solely on Newfoundland. This accounts for their “extinction,” since they had nowhere to go and no one to aid them.

The Facts

- Archaeological evidence reveals Innu settlements on Newfoundland (Dr. Scott Neilsen, Memorial University).
- Tools made from Newfoundland stone were found in sites in Labrador and Quebec, suggesting there was travel to and from Newfoundland (Anthony Jenkinson, Tshikapist Foundation).
- Innu oral history maintains that Innu and Beothuk people moved back and forth between Newfoundland and Labrador (Pien Penashue, Innu knowledge keeper; Joseph Mark, Innu knowledge keeper).
- Indigenous People are adaptive. When European settlement on Newfoundland increasingly reduced access to foodways in the early nineteenth-century, some Beothuk People migrated to the territory of the Innu in Labrador (Anthony Jenkinson, Tshikapist Foundation; Ruth Holmes Whitehead; Dr. Scott Neilsen).
- A Beothuk woman, Shanawdithit, claimed before her death in 1829 that some of her family left Newfoundland to live with Innu relatives in Labrador (Dr. Scott Neilsen).

The distance across the strait between Savage Cove (Newfoundland) and L'Anse-Amour (Labrador) is only 18.51 kilometres! Ample evidence suggests there was movement across the strait.



The Truth About Demasduit

The Myths

- Demasduit was the second last known Beothuk person. She was captured by John Peyton Jr. in 1819; when he tried to return her to her people in 1820, she died of illness on the voyage.
- “Her last wish appears to have been to have seen Mr. Peyton. She seems to have expired with his name on her lips.”— Account of David Buchan, Captain of the voyage to return Demasduit.
- There is no reason to question Buchan’s claim (Ingeborg Marshall).
- “Demasduit felt beholden to Peyton, because he had saved her life.” – Ingeborg Marshall.

The Facts

- John Peyton Jr. murdered Demasduit’s husband, Nonosabasut, for trying to prevent her abduction (Sitara).
- Peyton left Demasduit’s newborn baby to die when he captured her.
- “She didn’t hang onto his coat tails and praise him. **She hated him.**” – Ardy Landry, who shares common maternal ancestry with Demasduit.
- There is a crack in Demasduit’s skull that occurred around the time of her death, suggesting that she may have died violently instead of by illness.
- “She died from a conk on the head and she didn’t like the man that they claim she did.” – Ardy Landry.



Santu Toney

grandmother of



Ivy Toney Landry



Demasduit

shares common
maternal
ancestry



Ardy Landry

mother of

The Beothuk Beyond 1829

The Myth

There are no extant Indigenous People in Newfoundland. The Beothuk People went extinct in 1829 when Shanawdithit died.

The Facts

- European men— consensually or not— had children with Beothuk women (Ardy Landry; Rev. Dr. Lloyd Ryan). Many of their descendants are still living.
- Rev. Dr. Lloyd Ryan's grandmother, Emma, would go on yearly trips into the forest between Green Bay and Little Bay to visit **Beothuk relatives until 1895**.
- In 1910, a woman named **Santu Toney** informed anthropologist Frank Speck that **she was Beothuk**.
- A group of women in Little Bay Islands were Beothuk, and spoke the Beothuk language until the last died in 1939 (Rev. Dr. Lloyd Ryan).
- Santu Toney's great-granddaughter, **Ardy Landry**, confirmed through DNA testing that **she shares common maternal ancestry with Demasduit**. This means that Landry and Demasduit share a direct female common ancestor.

The Beothuk: Still Here

The Facts

- Rev. Dr. Lloyd Ryan can sing a song his Beothuk grandmother taught him. He is a descendant of Beothuks who has inherited Beothuk stories and cultural practices.
- Several people in Newfoundland emphatically claim they are Beothuk or have Beothuk ancestry (Rev. Dr. Lloyd Ryan; Ivy Toney Landry; Ardy Landry; Lisa Brown).
- The Province of Newfoundland is unwilling to listen to oral history or acknowledge living Beothuk People as Beothuk. Mi'kmaq Chief Mi'sel Joe argues that this is because Newfoundland would then have to consider what it would mean for an Indigenous group to have legitimate claims to the land when the province has long asserted that there are no Indigenous owners of the land left. It is in the interest of the province to perpetuate the lie of Beothuk extinction.

"We're here! We're out here!"

- Ardy Landry

"The government can't say there's no Beothuk because they're standing right in front of one. That's me."

- Lisa Brown

"That's the biggest myth that has ever been played in Newfoundland that the Beothuk people are extinct. They're not. They're still around."

- Mi'kmaq Chief Mi'sel Joe

"There's living proof right today that there's lots of Beothuk around."

- Joe Offrey

Bibliography

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The Beothuk Story. Film. Directed by Christopher Aylward. Zamura Films, 2022.

Image Credits

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