

Ralph T. Pastore, *Shanawdithit's People: The Archaeology of the Beothuks*.

Robert McGhee

Volume 13, Number 1, Spring 1997

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds13_1rv01

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McGhee, R. (1997). Review of [Ralph T. Pastore, *Shanawdithit's People: The Archaeology of the Beothuks*.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 13(1), 90–92.

REVIEWS

Ralph T. Pastore, *Shanawdithit's People: The Archaeology of the Beothuks*.
St. John's: Atlantic Archaeology (distributed by Breakwater Books),
1992. 74p. illus., hardcover, \$19.95, ISBN 0-929048-02-4

ROBERT MCGHEE

WITH THE DEATH of Shanawdithit almost 170 years ago, the Beothuks disappeared as a people. Over subsequent decades the aboriginal inhabitants of Newfoundland gradually emerged in popular culture as mysterious figures whose existence, and eventual extinction, were beyond the range of normal human experience and understanding. This well written and profusely illustrated book provides, for the first time, and in a format accessible to both scholarly and general audiences, an historical study which provides plausible answers to most questions regarding the Beothuks.

Ralph Pastore is in a unique position to undertake this study. Trained as an historian, and practised as an ethnohistorian researching the native peoples of eastern North America, at Memorial University he decided to add the trade of archaeology to his skills. Over the past two decades he has become an accomplished field archaeologist, while maintaining the critical historical skills which are too often lacking in those of us who have trained purely as archaeologists. The results of his unique perspective are apparent in the book under review.

The opening segment places the Beothuks in prehistoric context, not as the primordial inhabitants of Newfoundland but as the last in a series of aboriginal peoples who each occupied the island for a few centuries or millennia, only to withdraw or disappear. This allows opportunity for discussion of the unique character of Newfoundland's biological resources, comprising a relatively small number of species whose availability to hunters and fisherman is dependent on

factors of climate, environment and chance. In this context, the Beothuk are seen as not the first people whose way of life was ended by the hazards of the Newfoundland environment, and perhaps not the last.

The next portion of the book uses archaeological evidence to reconstruct the culture, economy and way of life of the Beothuks during the centuries before and after Europeans began visiting Newfoundland. Pastore's excavations at the Boyd's Cove site, in eastern Notre Dame Bay, serve as a focus for this endeavour. Here, the remains of a settlement occupied by a band of perhaps fifty people during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, have produced the most complete picture yet recovered of Beothuk life during the period of early contact with Europeans. Arrowpoints chipped from stone and bone pendants intricately engraved with aboriginal motifs are found alongside scraps of metal, a few shards of coarse pottery, fish hooks, and iron nails which have been reworked to form arrowheads, skin scrapers and other tools. Pastore reconstructs a Beothuk culture which was very similar to that of the ancestral Innu who occupied Labrador at the time, and who were close relatives, allies and occasional trading partners of the Beothuks.

Pastore supplements and extends the archaeological information with a comprehensive and comprehensible summary of historical accounts relating to relations between the Beothuk and the English, French and Micmac newcomers to Newfoundland. This treatment of Beothuk history is centred on the question of why they withdrew from European contact and eventually became extinct, while the closely related Innu and other mainland Indian groups involved themselves in European economies and survive to the present day. He concludes that the fur trade, which was the mechanism linking other native groups with European newcomers in eastern North America, was subverted in Newfoundland by the nature of the European summer fishery. The Beothuks were able to obtain access to European materials by pilfering abandoned fishing stations during the winter months, and thus avoided the negative consequences of an organized fur trade. Initially beneficial, this strategy eventually led to a mutual hostility which forced the Beothuk to withdraw from encroaching European settlement, and to become more vulnerable to the hazards of environmental chance in an island ecosystem.

In Pastore's reconstruction, the Beothuk were no stranger nor more enigmatic than the Innu, Micmac and other related Indian nations of eastern Canada. Nor was their extinction either a mystery or the result of the ethnic cleansing on the part of ancestral Newfoundlanders which has become elaborated in popular tradition. Rather, the Beothuk disappeared through a series of contingent circumstances: the limitations of an island environment; the nature of the European fishery which became established in Newfoundland during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries; and a series of unfortunate misunderstandings between individuals and groups who did not comprehend the others' languages or motives.

The Beothuk story is no less tragic for being understandable in historical and environmental terms, and it is a story which Pastore tells with clarity and empathy. *Shanawdithit's People* also serves as a fine example of scholarly writing that is accessible to a general audience.