

3

First Meeting

Chapter Outline

This chapter describes the history of contact between the peoples of the North American continent and the peoples of the European continents as well as the United Kingdom. It looks at some of the ways these early interactions began to disrupt Indigenous Peoples across what would become Canada. Prior to documented dates of contact however, there is evidence which indicates the existence of earlier cultural exchange. The eastern arctic was the place of first contact between Indigenous Peoples, namely Dorset (ancestors of modern Inuit) and Beothuk peoples. After this time, a succession of European explorers took the shock value out of these early contacts. However, in spite of ongoing European presence in the form of whaling and fishing activities, there was little sustained contact until the demand for fur brought more European traders and settlers.

There were differences in the ramifications of these early contacts for the various Indigenous groups involved. For the ancestors of Inuit, the first primary basis for involvement with Europeans was whaling activities, and in this regard, Inuit technology for deep sea whaling soon led to the growth of worldwide whaling. From an Indigenous perspective, some of the first trading encounters with the Inuit also revealed just how strong the European desire was for the fur clothing worn by the Inuit. It was along the Atlantic coast, where more direct contact and subsequent conflict and hostilities arose as European trappers began to compete with Inuit people for fur and game resources; however, the Inuit were less susceptible to significant disruption to their lifestyles as the harsher arctic environment was not appealing to the Europeans.

For the Beothuk of Newfoundland, their first interactions began with European fishermen off their coastal waters. The Beothuk were known to have been extremely wary of European explorers, a sentiment likely connected to the actions of Portuguese explorer Gaspar Corte-Real, who had taken 57 Beothuks and sold them into slavery. As European fishermen began to intrude into Beothuk fishing sites, hostilities erupted and continued to become increasingly violent, especially once the Beothuk began to aggressively defend encroachment on their natural resources. As settlement grew, the Beothuk retreated inland, but the ongoing feuding resulted in open hunting being declared on their people. By 1829, the last known Beothuk had died.

The final sections of this chapter address the ramifications of the rapidly advancing fur trade. European diseases that travelled along the pre-existing trade networks decimated large numbers of Indigenous Peoples before the physical arrival of traders themselves. The chapter concludes by discussing key differences between Indigenous and European ethos, indicating that these differences would lead to misunderstandings between the two groups, as well as that these Indigenous groups did not have diplomat-

ic measures in place that would have allowed them to unite quickly and prevent the takeover of their lands. Further, as a result of their diversity, the fragmented nature of Indigenous nations would come to be used by the newcomers as a tool for European domination.

Learning Objectives

- To recognize the different types of contact made as part of the early relationships between Europeans and Indigenous Peoples.
- To understand the differing nature of impact and their causes upon various Indigenous Peoples resulting from this contact.
- To gain insight into some of the early ontological differences between Europeans and Indigenous Peoples that help to shape our understanding of first contacts.

Key Terms, Figures or Sites

Beothuk: Indigenous inhabitants of Newfoundland at the time of the arrival of the Europeans. (p. 52)

Cabot, John (Giovanni Caboto) (c. 1451–1498?): Italian explorer financed by England who reached the shore of North America in 1497. He set out for the New World again in 1498, but his ship disappeared. (p. 47)

Cartier, Jacques (1491–1557): French explorer who reached what is now eastern Canada. France used his three voyages, between 1534 and 1542, as a basis for its claim to sovereignty of North America. (p. 50)

Demasduit (1796-1819): Beothuk woman who was captured by armed fur traders and taken to St John's, where she cooperated with her captors, providing enough information for Anglican missionary John Leigh to compile a Beothuk vocabulary. She died while waiting to be returned to her people, but her legacy lives in Leigh's work. (p. 55)

Dorset Name given by scientists to a culture that thrived for more than 3,000 years in what is now northern Canada and Alaska but disappeared around 1000 ACE, replaced by the Thule. Their name derives from Cape Dorset, on Baffin Island. (p. 46)

first meetings: First communication between peoples who have no prior knowledge of each other. One historian has listed three basic types: collisions, relationships, and contacts. (p. 42)

Heyerdahl, Thor (1914–2002): Norwegian anthropologist who developed a theory that people from South America, not Asia, had populated Polynesia. To prove his thesis, that sailors on rafts could travel the distances required for this, Heyerdahl sailed from Peru to Polynesia in the *Kon Tiki*, a replica of the balsa rafts made by South American Indigenous people. He later sailed from Morocco to the Caribbean in a replica of an ancient Egyptian papyrus boat. (p. 44)

Hudson, Henry (fl. 1607–11): English explorer who searched for a northwest passage to China on behalf of first the English Muscovy Company and then the Dutch East India Company, for whom he also explored the Hudson River. (p. 50)

Little Ice Age: Period between 1300 and 1850 when global temperatures fell, causing the northern sea ice to stay all year. This affected wildlife, which caused hardship for hunters. In Europe, it resulted in increased demand for furs, which spurred New World exploration. (p. 47)

Thule: Name given by scientists to the northern people who preceded the Inuit and whose culture spread from Alaska across what is now northern Canada to Labrador, Newfoundland, and Greenland about 1000 ACE. The Inuit are the direct descendants of the Thule. (p. 47)

Study Questions

1. What evidence exists to suggest that there was contact between Asian societies and Indigenous societies prior to any contact with Europeans?
2. What are the two sites in the world where writing was undisputedly invented? Why might this knowledge surprise a lot of people?
3. Provide at least two examples to demonstrate the author's statement regarding the 'formidable originality' of the Indigenous civilizations of the Americas.
4. Why did the Norse not remain in North America?
5. Where did first contact with Europeans take place in the Americas and what groups of people were involved?
6. What two ancestor groups preceded the 'modern' Inuit of the Arctic (in order of appearance)?
7. During this period, what were the activities which promoted more sustained contact between Indigenous Peoples of eastern Arctic and Europeans; secondly, what European groups were involved?
8. What was the primary reason for the lack of sustained contact in the Arctic region?
9. What is the Columbian Exchange? Provide some examples of this exchange.
10. In 1764, why was it necessary for the governor of Newfoundland to issue a proclamation urging that the Inuit peoples be treated as friends?
11. What was the result of contact for the Beothuk?

Essay Questions

1. Describe the three basic types of first encounters listed by one historian and briefly explain each. Provide one specific example of each type of contact drawn from the case studies presented in this chapter.

The three types of encounters are collisions, relationships and contacts. The transmission of diseases and the slave trade are examples of “collisions.” “Relationships” were characterized by trade, evangelization, and colonial administrations. Short-lived encounters between Europeans and non-European cultures reflect meetings that were considered to fall under the type of “contacts.” These were usually peaceful encounters that occurred between groups who knew nothing of each other previously; however, certain behaviors that might be interpreted as threatening could then eventually lead to collisions. (pp. 42–43)

The Norse and Skraeling encounters are an example of relationships. This encounter was most likely with the Dorset people. It is believed they traded for various goods, especially weapons. Evidence for this relationship also stems from discovery of an Inuit figurine from the thirteenth century, which was found in Bergen, Norway (p. 46). The story of Henry Hudson’s brief trade exchange, is an example of a first meeting that be termed ‘contact’ (p. 50). The Beothuk are an example of a collision that resulted in the extinction of the people (pp. 52-53).

2. Briefly discuss two examples of possible transoceanic cultural exchanges for which there is some evidence. Explain the nature of the evidence, its implications, and a time frame for the cultural exchange.

Examples can include any of the following:

- Two varieties of Asian chickens found in America when Spaniards arrived (p. 43)
- Peanut (an American plant) found in China 5300–4800 years ago (p. 43)
- Ceramics found at Valdivia, Ecuador, dated to 5200–4800 years ago resembled Japanese pottery, and led to much debate; later refuted as a theory (pp. 43-44)
- India-American connection through the exchange of plants (p. 44)

3. Discuss the changing nature of these early contacts between Europeans and Indigenous Peoples in what is now Canada. Include the reasons behind these early encounters and be sure to focus your discussion on the Indigenous perspective about the nature and impact of these contacts.

Although there is strong evidence of earlier contact and/or exchange (pp. 43-46), the first documented contact took place with ancestors of the modern Inuit (Thule) (p. 47) and also Beothuk peoples. The Inuit had already had some interaction with the Norse; additionally, they were already familiar with European goods and items due to their extensive inland trading activities (pp. 47-49). This previous familiarity and skill with the trading process is evident in Inuit accounts of their first trade interaction with the English, which indicate that European traders so desperately wanted the fur clothing worn by the Inuit, they bargained with them to part with the clothes off their back in exchange for European garments.

Due to the Europeans' distaste for the harsh environment of the arctic region, there was no sustained contact or interaction for some time. As such, the Inuit way of life was left more unscathed than others who fared less well in the face of these early encounters.

Conversely, the Beothuk way of life was significantly affected even during the earlier period of fishers and whalers on the Atlantic coast. Intrusion into Beothuk fishing sites triggered hostilities these earlier contentious relations may have also been influenced by the fact that in 1500, the Portuguese explorer, Gaspar Corte-Riel, had taken 57 Beothuk to be sold into slavery (p. 52). As contact and developing settlement continued to grow, Beothuk concern for their natural resources increased, with more tension and feuding between the two groups. A self-ascribed sense of European may have also helped to justify the subsequent open hunting season declared on the Beothuk. Subsequently, the Beothuk became extinct; Shanawdithit, the last known Beothuk, died in 1821 (pp. 54-55).

As trading activities progressed, other detrimental effects suffered by Indigenous Peoples included substantial loss of life from the introduction of European diseases that travelled along existing trade routes. Large numbers of Indigenous Peoples and communities were decimated by these new diseases, especially smallpox (p. 55).

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous Peoples were skilled traders who operated on their own terms. The impact of these early encounters varied among groups also. When necessary, the Inuit had the advantage of retreating into their Arctic homeland, away from the comfort of the Europeans. However, the Beothuk suffered the fate of extinction as they fought to preserve their natural resources and lifestyles. For many more Indigenous Peoples, a sinister outcome of these first contacts was also death and disease, which decimated Indigenous communities in very high numbers. (p. 55)

Additional Resources

Further Readings

———. *Encounters on the Passage: Inuit Meet the Explorers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.

———. and Pitseolak Ashoona, *Pitseolak: Pictures out of My Life*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004.

Cook, Ramsay. *The Voyages of Jacques Cartier*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993.

Dickason, Olive Patricia. *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1984.

Eber, Dorothy Harley. *When the Whalers Were Up North: Inuit Memories from the Eastern Arctic*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989.

Fischer, David H. *Champlain's Dream*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2008.

Green, L. C., and Olive P. Dickason. *The Law of Nations and the New World*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1989.

Grant, John Webster. *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984.

Heidenreich, Conrad E. and K. Janet Ritch. *Samuel de Champlain before 1604: Des Sauvages and Other Documents Relating to the Period*. Montreal; Ithaca; Toronto: McGill-Queen's University Press; Champlain Society, c2010.

Marshall, Ingeborg Constanze Luise. *A History and Ethnography of the Beothuk*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996.

Morrison, R. Bruce, and C. Roderick Wilson, eds. *Native Peoples: The Canadian Experience*, 3rd edn. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Paul, Daniel N. *We Were Not the Savages: A Micmac Perspective on the Collision of European and Aboriginal Civilization*. Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Ltd., 1993.

Sleeper-Smith, Susan, ed. *Rethinking the Fur Trade: Cultures of Exchange in the Atlantic World*. Lincoln: University of Alberta Press, 2009.

Tkaczuk, Diana Claire, and Brian C. Vivian, eds. *Cultures in Conflict: Current Archaeological Perspectives*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1989.

Trigger, Bruce G., ed. *Handbook of North American Indians, vol 15: Northeast*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1978.

———. *Native and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985.

Wright, Ronald. *Stolen Continents: Conquest and Resistance in the Americas*. Toronto: Penguin, 2009.

Websites

Uncovering Secrets of Newfoundland's Extinct Beothuk Peoples

<http://www.rcinet.ca/en/2014/09/02/uncovering-secrets-of-newfoundlands-extinct-beothuk-people/>

Canadian Museum of History/Musée Canadien de l'Histoire. "Inuit and Englishmen: The Nunavut Voyages of Martin Frobisher."

<http://www.museedelhistoire.ca/cmc/exhibitions/hist/frobisher/frint01e.shtml>

Gaspar Corte-Real – Letter on the Voyage of 1591

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/amerbegin/contact/text1/gcreal.pdf>