

A People Dying

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Shananditti, The Last of the Beothucks, Keith Winter. J.J. Douglas Ltd., 1975. 160 pp. \$10.95 hardcover.

Legends of a Lost Tribe: Folk Tales of the Beothuck Indians of Newfoundland, Paul O'Neill. Illustrated by Jon Fraser. McClelland and Stewart, 1976. 95 pp. \$3.95 paper.

Recent years have seen a proliferation of books and articles dealing with the infamous slaughter of Newfoundland's native people, the Beothuk. Once a neglected and near-forgotten story, this tragic national disgrace has become the subject of widespread interest, especially within the school systems of Canada. Peter Such's fine novel *Riverrun* possibly introduced a large number of adult readers to an obscure segment of our history.

Keith Winter's *Shananditti* is a useful addition to the discussion for several reasons. It is a history that in general appears very firmly researched. It includes much original source material, which might otherwise be quite inaccessible to the general reader, incorporating diaries, reports, sketches, maps, and letters produced by several of the major characters involved in the final stages of the extermination of the Beothuk.

The book begins with a brief introduction to the early history of contact, outlining the possible origins of the Beothuk, their encounters with early Portuguese, French, and Spanish slavers, and their final and fatal confrontation with the British settlers of Newfoundland. Winter also sketches the development of white society in the island, briefly explaining the political and administrative organization in the early nineteenth century, and referring in passing to economic conditions and religious institutions (although it appears doubtful that the Newfoundlanders of the early 1800's were "one-quarter United Church members"—the United Church was founded in 1925, and it might have been more accurate to refer to Methodists or Presbyterians).

The introduction also paints a vivid picture of the gory murders of hundreds of Beothuk adults and children, and throws light on the terrible degradation to which the natives were subjected by their "civilized" foes.

The main body of the book focusses on the life and death of Shananditti (or Shawnaudithit) and those who were closely related to her. A description of her childhood and the culture in which she grew are amplified by several sketches. Subsequent chapters deal with efforts by David Buchan to contact the Beothuk, even then on the verge of extinction, and with his attempts to establish peaceful relations with a people whom the government of the colony saw as harmless and worth preserving. Unfortunately the residents most directly concerned with the natives did not share this

patronizing attitude, and the massacres continued apace, with even David Buchan's assistants and companions apparently involved.

Using the words of Shananditti, recorded after her capture and transportation to St. John's, Winter is able to reconstruct the impression these encounters, both hostile and friendly, made upon the beleaguered Beothuk, who by this time had dwindled in number to a few families, no longer able to feed, clothe, house, or protect themselves adequately. He describes vividly the conditions which led Shananditti and her mother and sister to surrender to a settler they knew as a murderer, but who in fact took them safely to St. John's in order to claim the government-sponsored reward for a living Indian. After Shananditti and the other women were returned to their former home in the Exploits Valley, the mother and sister died of tuberculosis and Shananditti again surrendered herself to a white settler, the local magistrate on Burnt Island. Shananditti remained on Burnt Island for five years, and was then taken to St. John's and placed in the custody of William Cormack, who is responsible for recording much of our existing information about the Beothuk in general and about Shananditti in particular. The final chapters include some speculation by the author concerning connections between the Beothuk culture and other primitive or ancient civilizations.

This book will be useful as a reference and resource tool, since Winter has sewn together a chain of documents that tell the story of the final years of the Beothuk as poignantly as could an historical narrative of the events. By using the words of those closest to the scene, the author is able to convey some of the innocent brutality shown by well-meaning whites, who perpetrate such insensitive kindnesses as returning the corpse of a kidnapped woman to her family for burial. Her death had been accidental, the intentions were noble and generous, but the effect on the woman's relatives, as told later by Shananditti, was devastating. David Buchan's reference to a "malignant inveteracy" in the Beothuk heart which "actuates the natives to deeds most horrid", in this case to the killing and decapitation of two white men, seems strange when juxtaposed with descriptions of the butchery at Hant's Harbour, where settlers axed the adults in front of a large group of Beothuk children, and then slashed open the throats of the boys and girls. It is a grim chronicle that leaves the reader almost too hurt and angry to weep.

When the author strays from his sources into conjecture, however, he arrives on ground that appears less solid. Winter gives a population figure of 50,000 for the Beothuk, roughly equal to the present number of Ojibway or Cree. Other sources indicate that the actual population was probably closer to one or two thousand, and some authorities suggest that 500 might be the maximum. At the height of the massacres there were barely 20,000 whites in all Newfoundland; since many of these would not be involved in the campaign (the Beothuk tended to live in more remote areas), and since few settlers could claim more than 100 kills, it seems unlikely that a nation of 50,000 was exterminated by a handful of Europeans.

Similarly, Winter's claims for a connection between the culture of the

Beothuk and the ancient Egyptians rests on some rather dubious parallels in religious symbolism and in funerary practices. Winter elaborates the basic details of each culture and then states that it is "impossible to conceive that this strange death cult and complex burial ritual could have arisen independently in two separate parts of the world." One has only to read a little further into the ethnology of Central America, Peru, Polynesia, Southeast Asia, Europe, and Africa to learn that it is not only possible for such similarities to arise, it is almost inevitable. The universality of sun-worship, symbolism, and death ceremonies makes the parallels quite unsurprising, and Winter does not provide enough convincing evidence to justify his conjectures. His connection of the Beothuk with West Coast Indian cultures, based apparently on sleeping customs, is similarly tenuous.

In general, then, *Shananditti* is a welcome addition to the available material; although it might not be useful with younger children, it could be valuable for research and reference in secondary or post-secondary libraries.

Paul O'Neill's slim volume of folk tales, *Legends of a Lost Tribe*, is a rather unusual approach to Beothuk culture. When the actual record is missing, O'Neill invents stories that the Beothuk *might* have told. Unfortunately, most of these tales appear to be recyclings of myths and legends from other cultures, transposed into the setting of pre-contact Newfoundland, and I personally found the fabric somewhat strained. O'Neill has retained the characteristic inconsistencies often found in folk tales (for example, what were all the people living on before the creation of plants?) and has avoided the temptation to "clean up" the loose ends of the plot. This lends an air of considerable authenticity to the stories, and when I read these legends aloud to my class of seven-to-twelve-year-olds, they found them very interesting and enjoyable. This book, then, may be one of those creations which appeal to children in spite of the reservations of their elders.

There can be no question, however, that the illustrations by Jon Fraser add enormously to the book, and that Mr. Fraser deserves far more credit than the brief mention made on the back of the title page. His sketches are sensitive and evoke a fresh and clear image. One can almost hear and smell them.

In spite of the artificiality of the approach (and how else might we find out about Beothuk legends), and notwithstanding the apparent error in fact evinced by references to sea-birds nesting in the first gales of autumn, this little book might be a suitable purchase for libraries short of Indian legends or mythology. It is an interesting experiment; it may well succeed for a large group of readers.

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