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MICMAC COLONIZATION OF NEWFOUNDLAND

R.T. Pastore

When Europeans first began to settle in North America the Micmacs probably numbered between three and six thousand, and they lived in what is now Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. They were hunters and fishers who seasonally alternated between the interior where they hunted in winter, and the coasts and inshore waters from which they obtained most of their food. As far as is known, they were not in the habit of visiting Newfoundland prior to their first contact with white men, yet by the eighteenth century the Micmacs were well established on the island where five hundred of their descendants now live. The story of their colonization of Newfoundland is an interesting, and perhaps instructive, chapter in the history of Indian-white relations.

Although it does not appear likely that Micmacs hunted and fished in Newfoundland before the sixteenth century, only archaeological work will decide for certain. Archaeological investigation of the island's past has just begun, however, and the question cannot yet be answered definitively. Nonetheless, there are at least two considerations which appear to militate against such travel. First, it can be argued that prehistoric Indians from Cape Breton lacked the means to travel regularly and in large numbers to Newfoundland. Although the Micmacs possessed sea-going canoes, the sixty-five mile wide Cabot Strait between Cape Breton and Newfoundland would have presented a

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formidable obstacle to aboriginal migrants. Even today, its frequent storms and rough waters often make the crossing hazardous to modern fishing vessels. It is certainly possible, even likely, however, that the occasional Micmac canoe might have been accidentally blown to Newfoundland, but it would be very surprising if the Micmacs would have been willing to risk the lives of their women and children in seasonal voyages across those waters in frail, birchbark canoes. If there were some compelling reason for such trips, prehistoric journeys to Newfoundland might be more understandable, but no convincing reasons are readily apparent. There is, for example, nothing in the known prehistory of the Micmacs to indicate such things as a scarcity of food, the pressure of an increasing population, or a hostile invasion — the most likely causes of aboriginal migration.

With the advent of Europeans in the Gulf of the St.

Lawrence, however, the situation changed. It is not yet known exactly when the first European fishermen and whalers came to those waters, but it is clear that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they were using the five to six ton boats known as shallops. Micmacs acquired these shallops very early — sometimes by stealing them, and sometimes by trading furs for them. Such vessels were more than capable of making the crossing from Cape Breton to Newfoundland. Indeed, as early as 1602, it is clear that the Micmacs were familiar with the island of Newfoundland. In that year, for example, the vessel of the explorer, Bartholomew Gosnold, off the coast of Maine, came across "... a Biscay shallop with saile and Oares...." The eight Indians manning this boat "...described the Coast thereabouts, and could name Placentia of the New-found-land."

Indeed, the very name "Placentia" may be a European version of the Micmac word "Presentic" which, according to the early seventeenth century missionary, Father Pierre Biard, was the name given by Nova Scotia Micmacs to the whole island of Newfoundland.

It is clear that early seventeenth century Micmacs possessed the ability to travel to Newfoundland. The next question is why would they want to. The most likely reason was a shortage of game and fur bearing animals in Cape Breton. Of late there has been a tendency to think of Indians as natural conservationists, but in the historic period this has not always been the case. Once armed with European weapons and dependant upon European trade goods, Indians were perfectly capable of hunting and trapping local animal stocks to near-extinction. The depletion of the beaver population of New York by the Iroquois - which helped to cause the Huron-Iroquois war of the mid-seventeenth century — is well known, but it was probably not an isolated phenomenon. It is known that the Micmacs had begun to secure furs for trade as early as Cartier's time, b and it seems unlikely that the wildlife of Acadia could have remained undiminished after a hundred years or so of the sort of intensive hunting and trapping which characterized a fur trading economy. Unfortunately, there is little evidence about the wildlife populations of Acadia in the mid-seventeenth century, but there is one very suggestive piece. One of the pioneer settlers of Acadia, Nicholas Denys, who lived in Cape Breton in the 1650s, wrote in reference to some time during that period (unfortunately not specifying the date) that:

this island has also been esteemed for the hunting of Moose. They were found formerly in great numbers, but at present they are no more. The Indians have destroyed everything, and have abandoned the island, finding there no longer the wherewithal for living. 7

If Denys is to be trusted — and his monumental account is a model of sober, factual reporting - then his work suggests an Indian migration from Cape Breton due to overhunting. The question is, where would the Cape Breton Micmacs have gone, and the answer appears to be Newfoundland. That island must have seemed very attractive to Micmac hunters for a number of reasons. First, it was very sparsely populated by Europeans — especially in winter, 8 the best time to secure furs. Second, it was also lightly populated by its indigenous Indians, the Beothuks. If a pre-contact population of about five hundred Beothuks is assumed, then by the middle of the seventeenth century the introduction of European diseases would - if the Beothuk experience was at all similar to that of other Indians - have further diminished that people. In addition, that small Beothuk population would not have competed with the Micmacs in the fur trade. There is no evidence that the Beothuks were trading furs with anybody by mid-century. Not only were the Beothuks relatively small in number, but they also appear to have been concentrated in that period in Notre Dame and Bonavista Bays — the northern part of the island. 10 Seventeenth century English and French occupation extended from Bonavista Bay around the Avalon peninsula and west to Fortune Bay, and along the eastern shore of the Great Northern Peninsula. 11 A glance at a map of Newfoundland

reveals an area extending from St. George's Bay, to Bay d'Espoir, which was apparently not occupied by any group, Indian or white. Unfortunately, archaeological investigation of that region has never been done, but it is still reasonable to assume that that area, because of its vacancy, would have been attractive to the Cape Breton Micmacs.

Nothing is known of the seventeenth century faunal populations of the territory from St. George's Bay to Bay d'Espoir, but it is likely that the caribou herds of the center of the island were enormous — as they still were at the beginning of the twentieth century. 12 Nothing is also known of the size of fur-bearing stocks in that region either, but given the fact that English furriers were found largely in Bonavista and Trinity Bays, 13 and that the Beothuks were not engaged in trapping, one would expect that populations of beaver, marten, wolf, bear and fox, would have been — at the very least — greater than those found in Cape Breton.

All of this suggests that one should find accounts of Micmacs turning up in the St. George's Bay — Bay d'Espoir region after the middle of the seventeenth century. Unfortunately for the historian, things never seem to work out this neatly. Given the absence of Europeans in that part of Newfoundland, it would be a matter of great good luck if any reference to Micmacs in that area turned up. Nonetheless, some indication of "foreign" Indians in Newfoundland is to be found in the 1670s — but they are located on the Avalon peninsula, where, of course, the greatest number of Europeans lived. In a petition to the home government, dated 27 January 1670, the English planter John Matthews

referred to Indians on the Avalon who "came to Kill Beavers & other Beastes for their furres..." A few years later those Indians (it is assumed) were more clearly identified by another English planter as "...Canida Indians from the Forts of Canida in ffrench Shalloways [shallops] with French fowling pieces...." It seems likely that these Indians were drawn to the Avalon by the presence of the new French base at Placentia.

There are a few scattered references in Newfoundland to Indians - who were almost certainly Micmacs - in the closing years of the seventeenth century, but they were not clearly identified as such until the summer of 1705. In that year Daniel Auger de Subercase, the governor of Placentia, informed the Minister of Marine that "Vingt ou Vingt Cinq familles des Sauvages Miquemacs du Cap Breton sont passez dans cette Isle." This large band, perhaps 100 to 150 in number, planned, according to Subercase, to settle in Newfoundland because they wished to give the Cape Breton stocks of moose and other animals time to recover from over-hunting. Subercase hoped to send this band against the English settlements, and he also hoped to learn more about the unexplored portions of the island, "la profondeur des terres ou personne na jamais ete.... Although one cannot be certain about this, it is likely that the area to which the Governor was referring was the land from Fortune Bay westward to Bay St. George - the most likely region through which the Micmacs would have come to reach Placentia.

Subercase's report is significant for a number of reasons. First, it clearly identifies these Indians as Micmacs.

Second, the wording of his account indicates that this band had come to Newfoundland of their own volition; they had not — as has sometimes been alleged — been brought to the island as mercenaries. 18 Of course, they would later fight for the French, but this appears to have been a decision made by the Micmacs, not by the French. Thirdly, Subercase's letter makes it clear that a familiar pattern was at work — over-hunting on Cape Breton had forced that island's Indians to look to Newfoundland. And finally, the presence of such a large band, which included women and children, suggests that by the early years of the eighteenth century, the Cape Breton Micmacs were quite familiar with Newfoundland. It would not be reasonable to assume that Indians would have lightly risked the safety of their families by taking them into an unknown territory.

The Micmacs who presented themselves to Subercase may have come to Newfoundland to hunt, but they proved to be expert guerilla fighters as well. The War of the Spanish Succession, begun in the palaces of Spain and France, was carried to the remote English communities of Newfoundland by these warriors with deadly effect. 19 Judging by the damage which these Indians caused, the West Country fishermen of Newfoundland were no match for Indians who had been hardened in years of war on the mainland. When that war ended in 1713, the French and their Indian allies were supposedly barred from coming to Newfoundland for anything other than curing fish on designated portions of the coast, but it is clear that the Micmacs — and some Acadians — had little regard for the

Treaty of Utrecht. From 1715 onward, there are reports of Frenchmen and Cape Breton Micmacs crossing the Cabot Strait to hunt and trap in the area from Cape Ray to Bay d'Espoir. 20 By the 1730s, a small community of Acadians and Indians seems to have arisen near the site of the present town of Port-aux-Basques. From that point, they ranged inland, hunting caribou and taking furs. 21 On at least one occasion the Indians sold their furs to English merchants, but this appears not to have been a regular habit. 22 On the other hand, there are no indications of hostilities between these Indians and the English until 1748, the last year of the War of the Austrian Succession. In that year a party of about forty Micmacs from Cape Breton who were wintering in Newfoundland took twenty-three some English prisoners and carried them back to the mainland. 23

That seems to have been the last time that Cape Breton Micmacs fought English fishermen. Indeed, the island's fishermen appear not to have been troubled by these Indians at all during the Seven Years War — for reasons which are not clear to this writer. The end of that war, however, saw a dramatic attempt by the Cape Breton Micmacs to settle in what by then had become the easternmost extent of their hunting territory.

The fall of Louisbourg in 1758 was a catastrophe for the Cape Breton Indians. They had traded at that fort and had developed close relations with the island's settlers. Now their allies for so many years were gone, and soon the French settlers would be deported and

the island would be occupied by their long-standing enemies, the English. To understand the plight of the Cape Breton Micmacs, one must realize that by 1758 these Indians - and all others who had been in contact with white men for a long time - had become dependent peoples. Many of the old skills had been forgotten, and the Micmacs were accustomed to using such things as brass kettles, steel knives, woolen blankets, and muskets - things which they could neither make nor repair. Indians obtained these essential goods and services through the fur trade and as presents. But European powers did not give presents to Indians out of a sense of altruism. It was a wellrecognized maxim among those familiar with Indian affairs that presents were necessary to conciliate the tribesmen in times of war and uneasy truce. 24 The English victory over the French in the Seven Years War, however, meant that it was no longer quite so necessary to win over hostile or neutral tribes with lavish outlays of presents. The fur trade was not what it had once been either. By 1763, a combination of inefficiency, corruption, and shortage of furs had turned British efforts to reorganize the Nova Scotia trade into what one student of the period has called a "colossal failure." Public assistance was also not a workable solution, for the new government of Nova Scotia lacked sufficient funds to provide for Indian welfare. As Richard Bulkley, the Nova Scotia Provincial Secretary, put it in 1763, the Indians "...are reduced to great extremities, thro' want of Provisions for the support of life; which this Government has hitherto been accustom'd to supply in certain proportion, but is at present destitute of the means of any such relief...."26

The Micmacs were not only dependant upon Europeans for the things of this world, they were spiritually dependant as well. French missionaries had been labouring among them since the early years of the seventeenth century, and by the beginning of the eighteenth century they were Catholics. 27 The defeat of the French and their subsequent deportation meant, however, that the Cape Breton Micmacs were left without a priest to perform the necessary marriages, baptisms, and last rites. Understandably, the English authorities were reluctant to provide their new charges with a Catholic missionary. In the past, such men as Père Sebastien Rasle and the Abbé Jean Louis Le Loutre had made themselves notorious in English eyes for their leadership of the Indians of Acadia. 28 Nonetheless, Governor Montague Wilmot of Nova Scotia had recognized the Indians' need and had promised them a priest, but the Board of trade had not sent him one. The result, according to Wilmot, was that "...the Indians are very impatient and disatisfied without the exercise of their religion."29

Deprived of their priests and with provisions running short, the Cape Breton Micmacs fled, as their ancestors had before in times of trouble, to Newfoundland. In the fall of 1763 a number of Micmacs crossed the Cabot Strait to hunt and trap — and to visit a priest on St. Pierre. 30 St. Pierre and Miquelon, now the only French possessions in North America, were also the new homes of some one hundred and fifty Acadian refugees from Cape Breton. 31 Almost certainly, those Acadians had once been neighbors of the Cape Breton Indians.

Not surprisingly, British authorities in Newfoundland were alarmed at this attempt by two of their former enemies to make contact. One Captain Thompson, of the H.M.S. Lark attached to the Newfoundland squadron, intercepted the Indians off the south coast of Newfoundland and prevented them from reaching St. Pierre. 32 Although the tribesmen appear to have spent the rest of the season hunting in Newfoundland, their presence prompted the Newfoundland governor. Thomas Graves, to suggest a harsh solution to what he saw as a threat to his colony. "I am afraid," Graves confided to the Board of Trade, that "it will be attended with bad consequences, if these Indians cannot be confined to the other side of the Gulph; nothing can prevent their Trading with the French if they come to this island." But, Graves suggested, "as their numbers are yet small if gentle means will not confine them at Home, would it not be better to extirpate them from off the island, than suffer such a connection to be kept up." Graves saw little value in these new immigrants, even if they carried on a legal trade with Newfoundland merchants, for, as Graves put it, "Our own wintermen are better Hunters and cure their Furs infinitely better than the Indians...."33

On the other side of the "Gulph," white authorities, although aware of what was happening, could do little about it. Little in the way of help was forthcoming from England either. The Board of Trade had forbad the Micmacs to leave their homes but had sent no money for presents nor an authorization for a priest, not even a German one as

Wilmot had suggested. ³⁴ Faced with this sort of inaction, Jeanot Piquidawalet, the head of the Cape Breton Micmacs, ³⁵ decided to ignore the pronouncements of the British government and "...declared his necessity and resolution of going immediately to the French at St. Peters...for that purpose...." ³⁶ This time he was successful in reaching the French islands where "...he was not only well received... but," according to Wilmot in the fall of 1764, "he has continued on that Island ever since with his whole Tribe." ³⁷

This was very disturbing to Hugh Palliser, the new governor of Newfoundland. He had received word in the fall of 1764 that a French vessel had given out arms and ammunition to the Micmacs. 38 Now he believed that more than just the Acts of Trade and Navigation were being violated, even the security of the Newfoundland fishery might be in jeopardy. Surprisingly, the Micmacs who had come to Newfoundland in that'year had been provided with passes from the commanding officer at Louisbourg. Palliser had requested that these passes be rescinded, 39 but, in the following year the Micmacs had returned, this time armed with new passes from the government of Nova Scotia. 40 As he later explained to the Admiralty, about 175 Micmacs had shown up in the fall of 1765 "...to the great Terror of all our People in these parts, so that before the arrival of the King's Vessels they [the English fishermen] had begun to retire and had determined to abandon the whole Fishery to the Westward of Placentia Fort, for the Indians had already begun to Insult and Rob them on pretence of want of Provisions...." Palliser had

sent warships to drive the Indians away, 41 but he blamed the Nova Scotia government for giving them permission to leave Cape Breton. For his part, Wilmot's explanation for the passes was clear enough:

The letter from Mr. Palliser relating to the settlement of the Mickmack Indians in Newfoundland has evidently Arisen from some Misrepresentation made to him. Jean Aülaţ [the chief of the Cape Breton band] thro' a decent Submission to the Authority of Government, Applied for my leave to go over to the other Shore for the purpose of trading and hunting; had I refused my Consent, which I could with propriety, withheld, he might have taken that liberty with impunity, nor indeed can I find out the Law which prevents any of the King's subjects passing from any part of this Dominion to the other..."

One cannot help but wonder if Wilmot was prompted to issue these passes largely to get rid of a troublesome problem. Since the Micmacs in 1765 had assembled at Isle Madame and had threatened white settlers in the area, 43 it must have been tempting to Wilmot to speed them on their way to a place where they would be Palliser's problem, not his. They proved to be an insuperable difficulty for Palliser. By the fall of 1766, Palliser was convinced that these "bigoted [i.e., Catholic] Savages" were in Newfoundland to stay. In that year he had ordered the Indians out of Newfoundland and had revoked their passes, but since they had "dispers'd themselves through this Country,...I now despair of ever getting them out..."

Palliser's despair was well founded. Despite a pronouncement by Lord Shelburne, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, that the Cape Breton Micmacs were to be prevented from going to Newfoundland. 45 they continued to do so, and not surprisingly. They still lacked a priest, 46 and life in general continued to be difficult for them in Cape Breton. 47 Although it is clear that through the late 1760s and early 1770s the Cape Breton Micmacs were frequenting Newfoundland. 48 it is not at all clear if they were summering on the island. Here again, archaeological evidence might provide the answers. The years of the American Revolution are also somewhat of a puzzle. To date, this writer has not uncovered any indication that there were Micmacs in Newfoundland during the war years. There may have been, but the documentation is lacking. What little evidence there is argues against their presence. Governor Richard Edwards of Newfoundland, for example, in his annual report to the Board of Trade noted in 1779 that "...there has not been any Indian seen upon the Island for several years past."⁴⁹ The Micmacs simply may have evaded white notice during that period, but if they had failed to maintain their connection with Newfoundland during those years, it may have been because of the increased naval activity off the coasts of the island. The frequent clashes between American privateers and British naval vessels suggest that those waters may have been more dangerous to traverse than had formerly been the case. Probably more important, however, was the fact that war time made the Micmacs - and other Indians - once again valuable as friends.

The increased expenditures on presents by the British⁵¹ could have made it much more attractive for the Micmacs to remain in Cape Breton.

Following the end of the war, however, Micmacs again returned to the island. This time there were some added incentives for their migration. There was a succession of warm winters in the 1780s which decreased the quality of furs obtained in the Indians' home territory. To this must be added the influx of United Empire Loyalists to Nova Scotia which caused the Indians around Antigonish, for example, to fear for the loss of their lands. 52 The increased white population also meant even more pressure upon local wildlife stocks. Thousands of moose, according to one complainant, were being killed by poachers on Cape Breton. 53 This slaughter so alarmed the Council of Cape Breton that it passed a resolve in 1787 to draft an ordinance calling for the "preservation of Moose and Caraboo in the Island of Cape Breton."54 Given this set of circumstances, it is not surprising that in that same year a large band of about one hundred and fifty Micmacs appeared in St. George's Bay. 55 That band remained in Newfoundland throughout the 1790s, 56 and, indeed, their descendants are in Newfoundland to this day.

In 1808, George Monk, the Nova Scotia superintendant of Indian Affairs, penned a short commentary on the state of the Indians in his province:

When it is considered that the Province of Nova Scotia, being a Peninsula, has no back country for the Aborigines to retreat to, as the Population and Improvements by their Conquerors occupy the Rivers and Forests that were the Sources of their means of Subsistence, it is obvious that they must resort to other means, or suffer for want.⁵⁷

Monk was right about Nova Scotia. It had no backcountry to which its Indians could flee. But the Cape Breton Micmacs were more fortunate. For almost two hundred years its Indians had a refuge to which they could retreat in times of difficulty. The Micmac colonization of Newfoundland is an unusual example of North American Indians who extended their range despite the hostility of their white conquerors. Throughout the nineteenth century those Indians were ablé to retain much of their traditional way of life in Newfoundland. In that century, the abundant natural resources of the interior of the island of Newfoundland provided them with a much more satisfying life than that lived by their cousins across the Cabot Strait. It was only with the coming of the railway and the subsequent destruction of the Newfoundland caribou herd, coupled with increased white settlement, that Newfoundland's Micmacs found themselves - in the twentieth century, to be sure - suffering the same fate as those who chose to remain in their old territory. 58 Nevertheless, the courage and determination of those early Micmac colonizers remains a memory and a model for the island's present day Indians.

FOOTNOTES

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 - Hoffman, "Historical Ethnography," p. 110.
- Samuel Purchas, <u>Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His</u> <u>Pilgrimmes</u> (Glasgow, 1906), XVIII, 304.
- 4 Lucien Campeau, <u>La Première Mission d'Acadie (1602-1615)</u>, (Quebec, 1967), p. 208, n. 22.
- George T. Hunt, The Wars of the Iroquois (Madison, Wisc., 1968), chs. VI-VII.
- 6Samuel Eliot Morison, The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages (New York, 1971), p. 369.
- 7 Nicholas Denys, <u>The Description and Natural History of</u> the Coasts of North America (Toronto, 1908, pp. 187, 450.
- 8C. Grant Head, <u>Eighteenth Century Newfoundland</u> (Toronto, 1976), pp. 7, 12, 18.
- Professor James Tuck, personal communication. Professor Tuck of Memorial University of Newfoundland, and author of a number of works on the archaeology of the province, calls this estimate an "educated guess" based on the natural resources of the island, and the apparent scarcity of known Beothuk sites and remains, both artifactual and skeletal.
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 - 11 Head, Eighteenth Century Newfoundland, p. 19.
- 12A. Radclyffe Dugmore, <u>In the Heart of the Northern Forests</u> (London, 1930), p. 128.
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- Petition of John Matthews, 27 January 1670, British Museum, Egerton Mss. 2395 (photostat in the Maritime History Archives, Memorial University of Newfoundland).

15 John Downing, "A Briefe Narrative Concerning Newfoundland," rec'd., 24 November 1676. Great Britain, Public Record Office, Colonial Office 1/38 (photostat in the Maritime History Archives, M.U.N.).

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17 Subercase to the Minister of Marine, 22 August 1705, Ministere de la France d'Outre-Mer Colonies, Archives des Colonies, Serie CllC, vol. 4, docs, 219-220 (microfilm in the Public Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador.

¹⁸See, for example, J.D. Rogers, <u>A Historical Geography</u> of the British Colonies, Vol. V-Part IV, Newfoundland (Oxford, 1911, p. 99.

19D.W. Prowse, A History of Newfoundland (London, 1895), pp. 239-251.

Extract of a Representation of the Board of Trade to His Majesty upon the state of Newfoundland, 29 February 1715, C.O. 194/26, doc. 209; Commodore J. Percy to the Board of Trade, 13 October 1720, C.O. 194/8, doc. 165; Capt. St. Lo to the Board of Trade, 26 April 1725, C.O. 194/7, doc. 269; Commodore St. Lo to the Board of Trade, 30 Sept. 1727, C.O. 194/8, doc. 137; Lt. Vere Beauclerk to the Board of Trade, 14 October 1729, C.O. 194/8, doc. 276.

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 $22\textsc{Commodore}$ J. Percy to the Board of Trade, 13 Oct. 1720, C.O. 194/7 doc. 10.

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Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York, 15 vols.,

(Albany, 1853-87), X, 174.

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28<u>Ibid</u>., pp. 53-57.

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 30 Governor Thomas Graves to the Board of Trade, 20 Oct. 1763, C.O. 194/15, doc. 109.

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33_{Ibid}.

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