

Part 1

The First Age of Canada

The First Inhabitants:
They Followed the Caribou

CHAPTER 1 THE FIRST HUMAN INHABITANTS

Today Canada is the most multi-cultural country in the world, and home to immigrants of every ethnic and religious group from every country in the world.

But less than 500 years ago, the only people living in Canada were the Aboriginal people of Canada. “Aboriginal”^[1] means the original inhabitants, the people who were here first . . .

—FirstPeoplesofCanada.com, Goldi Productions Ltd. (reproduced with permission).

Our First Nations, Inuit, and Métis of today are “fundamental” to the fabric of our country. Who were their ancestors? Where did they come from, and when? Where did they go, and how did they live? How did their lives change when Europeans settled in our country beginning in the early 1600s? These are the questions I have attempted to answer.

Introduction

My interest in the story of the first humans to inhabit the North American continent began with a visit to the Jardins des Glaciers in Baie-Comeau, Quebec. Its informative indoor and outdoor exhibits told the story of the ancestors of the present day Innu. Sadly, the Jardins Des Glaciers is now permanently closed (I believe due to a lack of continued corporate funding).

¹ The Canadian Constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal people: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. The Métis are the result of intermarriages between First Nations people—or Inuit, as in the case of Labrador—and the first Europeans (mostly French in western Canada) to explore and settle in Canada.

The Port au Choix National Historic Site on the west coast of Newfoundland proved to be an invaluable stop to learn about our first inhabitants, as was the Beothuk Provincial Historic Site at Boyd's Cove, which is also in Newfoundland. The Beothuk site gave me an insight into the consequences of European settlements in the New World, for our First Nations peoples. Of all the Aboriginal peoples, the Beothuk (pronounced "Beothik") perhaps suffered the most from early European contact; they became extinct in 1829. For this reason, I have dedicated a chapter to their story.

The story of the first inhabitants in North America is fascinating, and reaches far beyond the shores of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence and Newfoundland. In fact, it started some 12,000 years ago in the northwest corner of our continent (Alaska). However, as I would find out, as I began to write about this chapter in our history, the story of our First Nations and Inuit is complex in the extreme.

What I learned at First Nations sites and museums throughout Canada has given me some understanding of the evolutions and lives of our first inhabitants. However, the more I wrote the more I realized what I did not know, and therein lies my problem

A Personal Explanation

This "Part 1" proved to be the most difficult to write. As I wrote in the introduction, I am indebted to my wife Jay, as well as several friends and colleagues who read drafts of my entire manuscript. Despite all of the sites I visited, I found I had to rely more on books and online sources (see the bibliography) to learn the story of our first inhabitants and their descendants. As my friends and colleagues pointed out, the result of this research was a dry narrative, which was not my intended style. Even Jay got bored reading an early draft of "Part 1"—oops!

I obviously had to do something to save my marriage, friendships, and this book. So I rewrote and reorganized much of my account of our first inhabitants. My narrative covers five eras: (1) the first migrations; (2) their lifestyles before European contact; (3) selected issues affecting our first peoples after British settlement in Canada; (4) the story of the Beothuk; and (5) an overview of Canada's Aboriginal populations today, plus a few concluding remarks.

I have searched, so far in vain, for a book about the origins of our first peoples that would appeal to a broad readership. If you can handle academic scholarship, then perhaps consider *First Peoples In Canada* by Alan. D. McMillan and Eldon Yellowhorn, which is now in its 3rd edition (Douglas and McIntyre Ltd., 2004). The only reason I did not include it in my top five books for all Canadians is because although well written, it is an academic treatise of 336 pages *plus* a forty-page bibliography—you get the idea.

While I am on the subject of books, if you want to understand how our First Nations have been treated and mistreated in the post-European contact era, I recommend the extremely engaging, often humorous, and at times tongue-in-cheek writing style of Thomas King (a First Nations person) and his book *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People In North America*,

published by Doubleday Canada in 2012. King recounts in graphic detail the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the centuries since the two first encountered each other.

The First Human Inhabitants: They Followed the Caribou

The Port au Choix site is unique since it is here that the remains of four ancient cultures have been found. This is what I learned at the Port au Choix National Historic Site . . .

Palaeo-Indians

Towards the end of the last Ice Age, some 16,000 years ago, vegetation began to re-grow in Canada, which encouraged the migration of animals such as the huge woolly mammoth, giant bison, and large herds of caribou. These animals were followed by hunter-gatherers, the Palaeo-Indians (sometimes referred to as Palaeo-Eskimos). They crossed what was then a quasi-land/ice-bridge (now the Bering Strait) from Northern Asia (Siberia) into North America (Alaska) about 12,000 years ago. I subtitled this Part “They Followed the Caribou” since the caribou were more numerous, and I suspect easier to hunt, and kill than the other larger mammals.

Think about this. *Homo erectus* left Africa some 1.8 million years ago. Some ventured west to Europe while others ventured east into Asia. It took *Homo erectus* quite a few years—1.6 million, to be more precise—to evolve into *Homo sapiens* (modern humans), and a few more years before they arrived in Northern Asia.

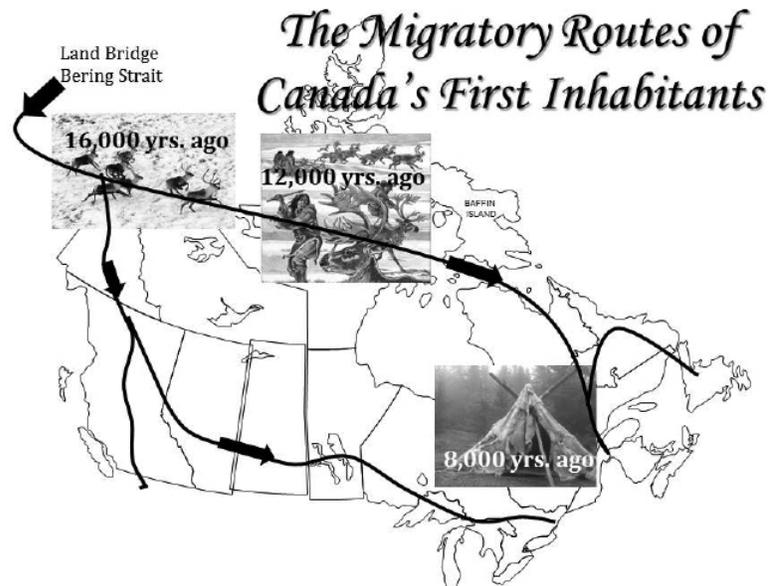
Archaeological and genetic evidence suggests that the North and South American continents were the last continents (except Antarctica) in the world to be inhabited by humans, so *Homo sapiens* had a lot of time to develop the skills and technologies that allowed them to survive the harsh conditions of the arctic.

These first inhabitants who migrated from Siberia to Alaska spread throughout the continent. In time, they diversified into many hundreds of culturally distinct groups, each with their own languages. Even today, there are some fifty-three distinct Aboriginal languages spoken in Canada. The diversification was the result of several factors: their geographical environments, the available sources of food, and the local resources to make tools, hunting or fishing gear, shelters, and clothing.

As Alan McMillan and Eldon Yellowhorn point out in their book *First Peoples In Canada*, “There was never any homogeneous mass of humanity known as Indians; that is a historical misconception.”²

2 McMillan, Alan and Eldon Yellowhorn, *First Peoples in Canada*, 3rd ed. (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004),

My sketch below of the routes our first intrepid inhabitants took is notional, as there is little archaeological evidence.



Stone tools provide archaeologists with the best clues to establish who was where and when. There is evidence that the Palaeo-Indians eventually made their way into the Saint Lawrence River region some 8,000 years ago. They were a determined people, and a few centuries after arriving in the Saint Lawrence region some made their way as far as Labrador. At L'Anse-Amour, Labrador, a ceremonial burial ground of a twelve-year-old girl has been unearthed and carbon-dated to 7,500 thousand years ago. Eventually, the Palaeo-Indians made their way across the strait to Newfoundland.

The evolution of the first peoples in Newfoundland is probably typical of the evolution that took place throughout Canada. So, by way of an example, in the paragraphs below, I am continuing the story as I learned it at the Port au Choix National Historic Site.

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