Adventures with the Beothuks in 1787: A Testimony from Jean Conan’s Autobiography

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In this paper we present a recently published text that affords valuable information on the Native inhabitants of Newfoundland at the end of the 18th century. The work is a rhyming text of 7,054 lines called *Aventurio ar Citoien Jean Conan a Voengamb* (in French *Les Aventures du Citoyen Jean Conan de Guingamp*). It is the autobiography of Jean Conan, a Breton from Guingamp in the interior of Brittany. The manuscript was written originally in Breton, the Celtic language of Brittany in the northwest of France. It was edited by a team of Celticists working at the University of Rennes and was published in 1990 together with a French translation and extensive historical and linguistic commentary (Cabon et al 1990). Portions of Conan’s autobiography are significant to Algonquianists for they provide a description of several encounters with Natives in Newfoundland in the year 1787.

1. Jean Conan and His Manuscript Autobiography

Jean Conan was born in 1765 in Guingamp, Brittany, to a family of poor weavers. He learned to read and write in his teens while he was working as a servant at the Abbey of Beauport, near Paimpol, a period during which he developed a passion for reading and writing. In 1787, at the age of 22, he set out from Paimpol on a cod-fishing ship ominously called Le Sauvage. The boat was wrecked in the icebergs of Notre-Dame Bay on the central northern coast of Newfoundland. After a number of impressive adventures, Conan sailed back to Europe in December of the same year. It is this episode of his life that will be related in more detail below. Back in France he enrolled in the Republican army (1792) during the French Revolution and fought several battles in France in 1793. After leaving the

1 The book was made available to Lynn Drapeau by one of the editors, Francis Favereau, to whom we wish to express our gratitude.
army in 1800, he went back to his life as a weaver in Brittany. Weaving by day and writing by night, he translated several works into Breton and composed a few original ones. He wrote his autobiography between 1825 and 1830 and died in 1834 at the age of 69.

Jean Conan's original manuscript is 321 pages long, format in-folio, bound in a cowhide cover. It contains nine illustrations as well as some cuttings representing ships. The original manuscript is still the property of Mr. de Chabannes, owner of the castle of Lesquiffiou in Pleyber-Christ, Brittany. The publication of this autobiography of citizen-soldier Conan coincides with the bicentennial of the French revolution of which it affords vivid descriptions.

Of the 7,054-line manuscript, only the first 2,000 are devoted to Newfoundland, the interest lying mainly in the fact that the Breton sailors meet Natives on several distinct occasions. It is one of the few documents where a sailor relates his experience with Native populations and one of the few non-English sources on the topic. We will contend that Conan and his fellow sailors met with three different Native groups during their stay in Newfoundland: the Beothuks, the Montagnais and the Inuit.

2. Jean Conan in Newfoundland

Le Sauvage got caught in the ice in Notre-Dame Bay on June 14, 1787. In the event, 40 sailors drowned. The 20 survivors managed to escape with one rowboat on the ice reported to be ten to twelve inches thick. They managed to set foot on land at Cap Saint-Jean. The sailors display a deadly fear of the Indians, especially of being eaten by them. Having nothing to eat or drink, Conan and a few others use their boat to find some fish but they are soon chased away by a group of Indians who throw stones at them. They then go back to their comrades empty handed. Almost starved, seven men and the Captain take to the sea while Conan stays behind with the others. The rowers manage to attract the attention of a “Chinese” boat whose crew leads them to Fogo, an English settlement east of Notre-Dame Bay. There, the commanding officer sends for the sailors left behind who are later rescued, fed and taken to Fogo. Six weeks later the English offer to take the Bretons to the French harbor called La Scie. Because of a severe storm they land at Shoe Cove, four kilometers away overland from La Scie. They are told by the English captain to walk from there to La Scie. Four of the men, Conan amongst them, are unable to walk however because of

Conan mentions 16 place names in Newfoundland, most of which had been identified by the editors of his manuscript. In all instances Conan’s accounts of the distance between the different locations are correct. This strengthens the reliability of his narration.
"land sickness". The others walk to La Scie and send the French to pick up Conan's party. Meanwhile, the latter are approached by Indians and spend a few days in their camp. Conan gives a rather detailed description of this second encounter. We will return to it in the next section.

A few days later, a French ship from La Scie picks up Conan's party. The sailors are then relayed from one French port to the next and eventually arrive at Saint-Julien. Off Saint-Julien they engage in cod-fishing but their rowboat is wrecked in a storm and they are rescued by a party of Indians. They later resume their fishing activities and Conan makes it back to France in the same year.

We will now describe the encounters with the Natives and set them briefly into their historical context, comparing Conan's observations with other sources.

3. Conan's Observations on the Indians

In the first encounter, a group of Indians throws stones at the sailors.\(^3\)

1011 On Sunday morning, we all began to be worried  
    Since we had found nothing to eat.  
    We followed the shore, four in a canoe  
    To see if we could catch some fish.

1015 But we did not go very far, as we were surprised  
    By rocks thrown at us by the Savages.  
    They were anxious to catch us and tear us to pieces;  
    So we took to sea to flee them.

1020 We sadly went back to our comrades  
    To tell them that the Savages had thrown rocks at us.  
    We were then all convinced that we were to die,  
    That the Savages would attack us, catching us unaware.

The second encounter gives much more information, since Conan spent a few days with the Indians, staying in their camp overnight. This occurs after he and three other sailors were left behind 4 kilometers away from La Scie. A group of Indians soon arrives and takes the guests to their camp to warm them. The total number of Indians in this band was 18. Conan mentions on several occasions that the speech of the Indians is not intelligible to him and that his Indian companions understand neither Breton nor French. Most of the communication takes place by means of signs and gestures. Both men and women wear the same type of clothes, made of seal skins and bear skins wrapped around their bodies. Their

\(^3\)In all cases of material quoted from Conan, we have followed the numbering of the editors. The translation into English is ours.
dwelling resembles “an underground den, one half of which was in the open, so that the sun, the stars and the moon could shine in.” They light a fire of considerable size in this open part that was to be used also for cooking. Stones were set around the fire to sit on. The sheltered part of the dwelling was used as sleeping quarters. They slept on a little dry white grass and moss, using reeds as pillows. They all slept together with their clothes on. The Breton sailors naturally slept in the same quarters.

When the band goes out to hunt, they leave behind an old crippled woman and a young girl of about 15 or 16 to keep the sailors company. When they come back to camp at sunset, they are loaded with salmon and “white fish”, bear meat and skins. The sailors receive the best parts and they give their ship biscuit in return.

1295 As for us, when we saw that the English and the French were gone, We went with the Savages to their hut. They took us to the fire to warm us. My heart was scared, I could only tremble. The Savages were discussing but we could not understand them;

1300 We said nothing, as we were unable to talk. I thought of offering them some of my cookies. And then they left; they all left. There remained with us only an old crippled woman And a young girl who could have been fifteen or sixteen.

1305 Those we could see were women; It was difficult to distinguish, since they all wore the same clothing. Sealskins and bear skins, Wrapped around their bodies. That is how they dressed. The young girl spoke to the old one while looking at me.

1310 She seemed to want to come to speak to me. As for me, I looked around in bewilderment: What a sad sight! The hut looked like a den, But half of it was opened to the sun, the stars and the moon.

1315 The fire was located in this part, a considerable fire; The other end was well sheltered; It must be where they sleep at night. But I saw nothing to prepare food with. There were stones around the fire to sit on.

1320 The old woman remained seated on hers all day. In lieu of bedding, on the sheltered side, I could see dry grass and moss; this is where they slept. There was nothing else in this hut. I had never seen such a sad household!
The other three scared me in saying that I would be the first to be eaten. Because I was young and well-built, they thought I would be the first to die. Finally at dusk they all came back to the hut bearing meat, fish and skins. They were 18 in all including the old woman and the young girl; with us four, we were 22. They put big trees in the fire which was quite big; and then they laid the meat and fish to cook.

But I was not reassured when I saw them observing me; I thought they wanted to kill me. They spoke to me but I could not understand them; I was worried, and not without reason. When the meat and fish were done, they began to eat voraciously. What we were eating was bear meat, I could see it from the skin. There were also one or two salmons; and the rest was whitefish. They fed us the best parts and we offered them our bread. They look a cookie and shared it among themselves but I do not believe they liked it much.

Before they all go to sleep, the Indians tell the young girl who had earlier stayed behind with the sailors in the camp, to sleep alongside Conan. Afraid of being eaten by the Indians, the other sailors pressure him not to refuse. Finally, when we had dined and were warmed up they signaled us to go to bed. They all came with us and indicated where we could lie down. We had under us only a bit of white grass and under our head, a kind of pillow made of reeds. But they all seemed happy and satisfied.

They told the young girl who had stayed home with us during the day to lie down beside me. She looked glad, but I was not. She tried to please me, but I would not accommodate her. She was fondling me in a particular way. I wished I could be ten thousand leagues away!

In the morning, as Conan had not responded to the girl's advances, the other Indians tease her and she appears to defend herself. The Indians
hand over the left-over meat to the Bretons and take off, again leaving the old woman and the young girl behind. Some take off to the shore, others to the woods. Conan describes how the young girl tries to seduce him. Again, the other sailors pressure him.

At daybreak the Savages got up
And lay the rest of the meat on the embers

1375 For breakfast.
We ate it in order not to offend them.
I could see they were teasing the girl
For she had failed to obtain what she wanted,
She appeared terribly vexed,

1380 And I trembled in fear of having angered her.
She was probably defending herself, as she was talking a lot,

1382 But I was unable to hear what she was saying.
...

1391 Finally after having eaten, they left right away
In groups, relying on their providence.
Some went to the shore, some took to the woods,
According to their customs, to find something.

1395 The only ones to stay home were the awful old lady and my girlfriend
Who was letting me know that she desired me greatly.
She kept on touching my mouth with her fingers
And with her tongue licked the back of my hands.
My comrades never stopped annoying me

1400 For they reproached me for not making her happy.
Repeatedly they said: "Guingamp, you will be guilty
If we die here; there is no doubt that we will be eaten.
You are making this girl angry
And in the end she will have us torn to pieces!"

On the next day the girl takes him to a place where he can see a great number of bear and seal skins hanging to dry from trees. She urges him to take the most beautiful ones. They sit together under a tree for two hours and chat, telling each other unintelligible stories. Back in camp, Conan tells his comrades to walk over to La Scie if they wish. As for him, he wants to stay behind with the Indians and hunt with them for the rest of his life. Conan changes his mind however when a French boat comes to their rescue.

Around ten o'clock, she took my hand and led me
For a walk a few feet away.
She took me to a place where I was surprised
To see a great number of skins hanging from the trees.
Bear skins and seal skins put up to dry.
My girlfriend gestured urging me to take the nicest ones.
I caressed one to show that I liked it,
She took it down with a smile;
She took another even nicer one
And folded the two and handed them to me.

Then we sat beneath a tree;
She told me many things that I could not comprehend.
I spoke to her both in French and in Breton,
It did not matter, in the end, what I told her.
After staying there for two hours at least,

We went back to the hut for a rest.

The Savages soon returned loaded with meat.
Trees were put in the fire to cook the meat
And they all gorged themselves with it.

We thus ate a piece each, we had to
Since we had finished our cookies in the morning;
After dinner we went to lie down,
But we were awaiting daybreak impatiently!
During the night, I was jittery and upset.

I could not rest nor sleep.
Finally, it was dawn and the Savages got up
To heat up the remains of the last meal.
When I had some quiet, I fell asleep;
It was well into the day when I woke up.

The others had shared the Savages' meat
And my girlfriend had set some aside for me.
I had to love her since she loved me.
She cherished me night and day.
After breakfast, she took my hand and we went out for a walk.

We went near the sea and sat down in the grass.
After an hour,
I realized that my beloved was crying
Gesturing, I asked her what was wrong;
She pointed to the sea.

She showed me the ship that had finally come to get us.
My beloved was crying but I wanted to laugh.
I promptly got up to inform my comrades
Who were as happy as I was.

This was the second encounter with the Natives, and certainly the most intimate and detailed one.

A third encounter occurs while fishing near Groais Island and Bell Island close to the eastern coast of the northern peninsula, also called the
“French Shore” or “Le Petit Nord”. Conan and some of his comrades get caught in a storm again. After some frightful hours and having jettisoned all their cargo, they cry for help close to shore. A group of Indians then climbs down the cliffs and saves them by throwing ropes. This event took place at “Le Bus”, a site inhabited by Indians. The Indians take the sailors to their camp. Five or six Indian girls are wearing European clothing, offered by the captains at Saint-Julien. Indeed, these Indians went to Saint-Julien every week with their women to amuse the officers, in exchange for some clothing or a little food. After the wind dies down, they head back to Saint-Julien and reach it at dawn.

1935 We were driven towards a land that we did not know, And there we thought we were going to die. The three of us shouted: “If there is someone out there, Come to our rescue, otherwise we shall perish here in this sea!” A band of Savages came down clinging to the reefs.

1940 And threw ropes to save us. Upon catching one, we would pull it and they would hang on. We jumped close to them and fastened our boat. This place was called “Le Bus”. Savages lived there. Reasonable people, although barbaric.

1945 They often came to Saint-Julien to bring their women To amuse the officers in exchange for a bit of clothing or food. They took us to their huts to warm us We were naked and could not put our clothes on. They lit a fire for us as in a forge.

1950 And we soon had dried our clothes. Among the Savages, five or six girls Were neatly dressed, like young ladies. These clothes had been to given them by the captains Who in Newfoundland gave them to Savage girls.

1955 Every week, we would see the Savages’ boat Heading for Saint-Julien with the young ladies. Among the Savages, the men are not jealous. On the contrary, they are happy to see their women being fondled. We were only poor fellows. They nevertheless made us

1960 Propositions as we were going back to our boats. To this day, I say that we are the ones who should be called Savages Considering the things that preoccupy us.

This is the third and last encounter with the Natives described by Conan. At this point Conan gives a summary of his vision of those he calls “ar sovaged”, ‘the Savages’:
I said that I regretted being French
For the Savages are wiser and more honest
than the French, who are always unsatisfied people
For the Savages, after what I saw, if they do not pray to God,
1970 they also do not know how to offend Him
They have neither ambition nor jealousy
They have no needs but to find something to eat
They feed themselves with meat, with fish and with game
Whose skins they use as clothing.

4. The Identity of the Natives

At this point, one may ask who were the three groups of Natives that Conan came across? In the late 18th century, there were three or four Native groups who lived on or used to travel to Newfoundland. The Beothuks inhabited the interior and the coast of Notre-Dame Bay, the Micmacs were located mostly in the southwest of the Island, although they also hunted and trapped far in the interior, perhaps even as far as Notre-Dame Bay (Marshall 1988; Pastore 1989). The Montagnais crossed the Strait of Belle Isle to trade and they also hunted and trapped on the west side of the Island. It is not clear whether the Inuit still traded on the northwest shore with the Europeans as they were still reported to do with the Basques in 1714.

The fate of the Beothuks is well known. They are reported to have had only little contact with Europeans, whom they avoided. Due to a number of factors, they are now extinct, the last known Beothuk having died in 1829. Factors like European diseases, encroachment on their habitat by Micmacs and Europeans, scarcity of wildlife, lack of use for them by Europeans (e.g., as fur suppliers) have been mentioned.

Traditionally, the Beothuks were dwellers of coastal areas, where they could rely both on the sea and the interior. Due to European fishing activities they were forced to withdraw to the interior, maintaining only Notre-Dame Bay. Pastore (1989) points out that this area was “positioned in an area safely between the two zones of European exploitation”, namely the French migratory fisheries on the west side of the Bay and the English permanent settlements from Bonavista Bay eastwards. While Pastore’s remarks refer to the period 1650–1730, Conan situates the Beothuk camp between these two areas, almost 60 years later.

As for the fishing activities from France, the North American fisheries were an important economic force in the Breton harbors. Between 1713 and 1792, two out of every three ship outfitted in Saint-Malo sailed to North America to fish. In the years 1784–1788 an average of 109 ships went to North America from Saint-Malo alone every year (Brière 1988). Keeping
THE BEOTHUKS IN 1787

in mind that Notre-Dame Bay was probably the only place on the coast where the Beothuks still had access to the coast, contact between them and Breton fishermen in that area is not at all surprising.

We will now deal with the three encounters separately and try to establish the identity the Natives. In the first encounter there are three reasons to suppose that the Natives who stoned the sailors were Beothuks. On the one hand, this would be a normal reaction on the part of a group on unfriendly terms with the Europeans. Second, the geographical location is known to be in Beothuk territory. Furthermore, both Micmac and Montagnais hunters would have had more sophisticated weapons.

There are several indications that the Indians of the second encounter were also Beothuks. First, the geographical location is again in line with reports on the Beothuk. Second, the cultural traits ascribed to them are consistent with other sources on the Beothuks. Moreover, the lack of mention of any western implement in the camp would be typical of the Beothuk. Conan mentions the use of bears, seals, salmon and white fish as food or as clothing. Both biological data from that period and ethnographic sources on the Beothuks lend credibility to this testimony. Tuck and Pastore's (1985:75) study of animal life in Newfoundland shows that all of these species are indeed available in June in the area and salmon and harbor seal specially abundant. The seals mentioned are probably harbor seals, a sedentary species that could be hunted in bays and inlets, especially when the open sea is covered with pack-ice (Tuck and Pastore 1985:76)—which happened exactly to be the case in June of 1787. The use of seal and salmon is further confirmed by Shanawdithit, the last known Beothuk woman (Howley 1915). As for bears, it is not clear whether the skins identified as bear skins by Conan were really so. Howley mentions the use of deer skins rather than bear skins. In short, Conan's observations on the Beothuk way of life are compatible with other sources on the Beothuks.

In this second encounter, the Beothuks appear to have been more friendly than those of the first encounter. When he abandoned Conan on the mainland four kilometers from the French port of La Scie, Captain Quinn said of a party of Indians who were watching the Bretons disembark: "I do not think that the Indians will do them any harm, for they are used to seeing people navigate and anchor here when they feel like it, and these Indians do not attack them" (lines 1285–1289). Indeed, the four men who

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4It is not clear, however, to which species "white fish" refers and whether it is freshwater fish or sea fish. The Breton text says pesqued guen, translated into French as 'des poissons blancs' (line 1329) which appears to refer to a white-coloured fish rather than to the species whitefish.

5If Conan's observation is correct, bears may have been of more importance for the Beothuk than was hitherto supposed.
were left behind were led to the Beothuk camp and treated in a friendly manner. There thus could have existed at least two different groups of Beothuks, the ones close to Fogo who appeared to be on unfriendly terms with the English (see next section) and others in the vicinity of La Scie who were more amenable.

As for the third encounter, we want to suggest that the Indians involved were Montagnais rather than Beothuks. Montagnais groups roamed the northern peninsula of Newfoundland in that period and the events took place in an area where the Beothuks were never reported. According to Martijn (1990), “As late as 1788 Montagnais groups were coming to the island [of Newfoundland] to take furs and to trade with the French fishermen on the Petit Nord.” Martijn also reports several mentions from British sources of Montagnais (from the North shore of the St. Lawrence River) on the west side of Newfoundland between 1785 and 1792. Although there is no mention of them on the east coast of the northern peninsula, they were reported to travel inland for fur. It is thus likely that they could have visited the east coast of the northern peninsula. Furthermore, the western clothing and the reported customary contacts with French fishermen suggest that they were Montagnais rather than Beothuks. In short, the evidence suggests that whereas the first two encounters involved the Beothuks, the third one was with the Montagnais.

5. English Fishermen and the Notre-Dame Bay Beothuks

Conan provides information on the relationship between the English around Fogo (east of Notre-Dame Bay) and the Beothuks. After rescuing Conan’s party, the English captain who takes them to Fogo tells them that God has certainly performed a miracle for “at the place where we had been there were a million Savages, they had to have been petrified or metamorphosed by God, otherwise they would have eaten us on the first day” (lines 1165–1969). This attitude appears to have been common among the English settlers of the area. Conan reports that in Fogo armed men guarded the area during the night. In the summer of 1792, five years after Conan’s visit to the area, British naval officer Christopher Pulling interviewed a number of English settlers (fishermen, planters and furriers) of Bonavista Bay and Notre-Dame Bay about the Beothuks (Pulling 1792; Marshall 1989). Their attitude was highly hostile to the Beothuks whom they did not hesitate to kill for stealing nets and traps. Richard Richmond of Charlesses Brook informed Pulling that the Beothuks used to arrive in the area around the beginning of May and stay there until September. This is consonant with

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6Pulling mentions that he met with John Quinton of Fogo. The later could be Captain Quinn in Conan’s account (Marshall 1989:121).
Conan’s testimony. Another witness described a brief meeting with a party of Beothuks at Shoe Cove in 1779 (Marshall 1989:138), the very same site where Conan and his men were picked up by Indians a year earlier. Pulling also interviewed some people who launched an expedition against the Beothuks who had stolen nets, traps and other things from a fisherman. When they arrived at the Beothuk camp, they report that the Beothuks flew into the woods leaving behind an old woman and a young woman with an infant (Marshall 1989:126) — a close similarity with Conan’s own experience. The testimonies of the English fishermen thus support the view that the Indians met by the Bretons in the first two encounters were Beothuks.

6. A Fourth Encounter with the Inuit?

There were three unequivocal encounters with Natives but was there a fourth one? What about the “Chinese boat” that Conan reports his fellow seamen to have come across on the north shore of Newfoundland? Conan does not appear startled by this encounter but recall that he was in Newfoundland at a time when the existence of a North West passage to China was still believed possible (Saladin d’Anglure 1980).

Evidence suggests that the Chinese boat was an Inuit vessel. Using French archival sources concerning the cod fisheries at Le Petit Nord in Newfoundland, De La Morandière (1962) mentions the presence of Inuit in the area. He also mentions Inuit visits roughly to the locations where Conan’s fellows came across the Chinese boat around the same time. Indeed the Inuit had a long tradition of traveling to Newfoundland to trade with the Beothuks and to obtain European goods. According to De La Morandière the Labrador Inuit crossed the Strait of Belle-Isle and spread over the whole north coast of the island (De La Morandière 1962:24). Moreover, he reports that they spread over the whole coast of the Petit Nord all the way to the Cap Saint-Jean area and even to Bonavista to fish and hunt (De La Morandière 1962:385). This is in agreement with the location of the so-called Chinese boat. Moreover, Inuit contacts with the French were peaceful in the 16th century. They had been enemies for a long time, until they made peace at Chateaux Bay in 1756 or 1758 (De La Morandière 1962:19, 389).

Since the beginning of the Moravian mission in Northern Labrador in 1771, the Labrador Inuit used wooden vessels (Kleivan 1966:44ff). The two-mast wooden boats partly replaced the umiaks. They were used for distant

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7 We wish to thank Charles Martijn for bringing the following sources to our attention. One of the participants at the Algonquian conference also suggested that the Chinese ship may have been an Inuit umiak.
traveling, such as for trading expeditions to the South; they could carry up to 56 people on board (Taylor 1974: 38-39) and used women as rowers. It is therefore possible that the Chinese boat was in fact a European-type wooden boat with an Inuit crew fishing in or around Notre-Dame Bay, at a time of peaceful relations between the Inuit and the French fishermen. Taylor (1980) reports that one of these Inuit travelers, Tuglavina, traveled regularly to Chateaux Bay in the Strait of Belle Isle in the period of 1782–1790 in his own two-mast wooden boat with an Inuit crew.\textsuperscript{8} Tuglavina’s boat, or one like his, may have ventured further south as well.

7. Conclusion

If our interpretation is correct, Conan and his fellow sailors met with the Beothuks, the Montagnais and the Inuit in Newfoundland in 1787. His autobiography provides an exceptional first-hand account of the Beothuks and of two other Native groups who traveled to Newfoundland at the end of the 18th century. Its reliability is validated by contemporary and historical sources. It is one of the rare non-English sources as well as one of few descriptions given by sailors. As such, we feel it is an important document deserving wider knowledge among Algonquianists.

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