

Easter 1959: Oral and Written Memories of a Contested Event

Peter Evans

Ph.D. Student

Scott Polar Research Institute

University of Cambridge (U.K.)

evanspet@gmail.com

Abstract

In order to close and resettle the Inuit community of Hebron, Labrador in the late 1950s, Newfoundland government, church, and health officials, had to circumvent the normal decision-making processes and fora through which Inuit typically aired opinions and reached consensus on important matters. Officials announced the community's imminent closure at a meeting held in the Moravian church at Hebron in April, 1959. But this was not a "meeting" in any Inuit sense of the word, and the event became a pivot in the modern history of Labrador Inuit, contested throughout the ensuing decades by Inuit participants, their descendents, and the officiating bureaucrats. This paper explores the controversy, comparing the competing truth claims of Inuit and bureaucrats, and the very different rhetorical, political, and administrative cultures each represents.

Keywords: Hebron, Northern Labrador, Canada, Relocation

This research arises from a larger ongoing Ph.D. project examining Inuit representation and resistance to the ideologies and narratives of missionaries, traders, and governments in Northern Labrador. Several forms of resistance come and go over a very wide swath of Labrador Inuit history. For example: 1.) men's meetings, *katimaks*, sometimes called "councils" in the Moravian mission's reports, have been an instrumental means of gathering and forming group opinion in Labrador Inuit culture from pre-contact times; 2.) Twentieth-century Moravian Inuit communities in Labrador were regulated by two elders councils drawn from the adult chapel servants—the *kiggat*—and elected from the most powerful adult men of the settlement—the *angajokKauKatiget*; 3.) Writing,

learned under Moravian tutelage in the 19th century, became a central format for representing community grievances to outside patrons up to the present.

I focus my work on the epoch that begins in the aftermath of the Second World War, when Newfoundland joins Canada (1949), taking its colonial possession Labrador along with it. Confederation unleashed new forces on Labrador Inuit and their territories. I've been measuring these forces—and Inuit struggle against them—as they gathered around the northern settlements of Nutak and Hebron, resulting in their closures in the late 1950s. Twenty-six families were relocated from Nutak in 1956 and 38 families from Hebron in 1959. Nearly 500 people in total were scattered to four communities along a more southerly stretch of the same coast.

As Newfoundland and Canada worked out the shape of their new relationship after Confederation in 1949, they made up policy affecting aboriginals as they went along, often with little reference to programs elsewhere in Canada. They were aided in this by rapid growth in office technologies, and the growth of the post-war office as a knot of information gathering, processing, and delivery. Everything was now re-organized around these lines of communication and power running west-east between Ottawa and its branch offices, to St. John's and its branch offices. A vast amount of expert knowledge and rhetoric about Inuit affairs was uploaded and reproduced down the line for consumption. Formerly, Inuit had dealt directly with Moravian patrons. Now, for the first time, they were not considered "an audience" of this discussion.

I'm going to talk about a single morning in April of 1959, when Hebron Inuit learned that their community's church and trade store were to be closed, and their community split apart and shipped southward. I've chosen this moment because all the forces at work in Northern Labrador in the 1950s converged in the church that day. The meeting is the nucleus of Inuit memory of the relocations—and it is a defining moment in the administrative history of state-Inuit relations in Labrador, and in the careers of some of the administrators involved. Both parties have returned again and again to its mysteries, in spite of the passage of the decades.

April 10, 1959

On April 10, 1959, two plane loads of officials arrived separately on the airstrip at Hebron. One carried the provincial government's director the Division of Northern Labrador Affairs, Walter Rockwood, accompanied by an armed RCMP officer who had been ordered north to ensure that no trouble broke out. The other carried the superintendent of the Moravian Church in Labrador, the Reverend FW Peacock, and his missionary from the community of Nain, FCP Grubb; they were accompanied by the Labrador director of the International Grenfell Association, Dr. Tony Paddon, the supplier of health services to coastal Labrador communities. These visitors on that April day, and their agencies, stood for all the visible external authority that was involved in Labrador Inuit affairs at mid-

century.

This is what the bureaucrat Walter Rockwood reported to his superiors in the Department of Welfare several days later:

*2. I reached Hebron about noon on April 10th, a few minutes after Rev. FW Peacock, Dr WA Paddon, and Rev FCP Grubb had arrived there in another aircraft. Shortly afterwards, I met with the above named and Rev SP Hettasch of Hebron to discuss the closing of Hebron, and the manner in which the Hebron people were to be informed of the Moravian Mission's and the Government's decisions in the matter. A meeting of all the people was then held in the church. **Rev. Peacock confirmed the Mission's decision as announced earlier by Rev. Hettasch, following which I read the telegram received from you on March 25th as follows:***

"You may inform Hebron people that following the withdrawal of the Moravian Mission Government of Newfoundland will assist families to move to communities South of Nain and that the supply depot will be closed".

The contents of the telegram as quoted above were translated into Eskimo by Rev. Peacock and read in the meeting. The text in both English and Eskimo was then posted up in the church and in the office of the Division of Northern Labrador Affairs. I did not elaborate further at that time.

3. Rev. Peacock left Hebron again the following day, but I remained there until April 15th for further discussions with Rev. SP Hettasch, Mr. T Baird, Depot Manager, and the Elders.

– WG Rockwood, "Letter to Deputy Minister of Welfare," 5 May 1959, PANL MG 908 Box 1 File 4

Inuit Views of the Church Meeting:

The church gathering of 10 April 1959 became the defining moment of Hebronimiut historical identity, destiny, and memorial narrative over the ensuing decades. It was lamented by Hebron exiles to a whole generation of anthropologists and historians, and continues to be preserved with clarity among those who experienced it and those who only heard about it. Nearly every Hebronimiut or their descendent I have ever interviewed has talked about the church meeting as a great injustice. Some of these accounts are obviously second-hand, or may possibly relate to other meetings that took place in the spring of 1959. Nevertheless, they reveal the importance of the event to Hebronimiut. In Inuit memory, the meeting is symbolic of the loss of Inuit power in communities after 1959. Recollections of the event stress the insult to Inuit elders, who had governed the communities with considerable autonomy from outsiders for generations. Several examples of personal testimony underscore these points:

At the time they had gathered people at the church, I didn't pay much attention to the first things they said because in my mind I was mad because I couldn't say anything in the church...These were their strong points: that there would be no minister at Hebron and also no store manager. We were told that the minister was going away on The Trepassey. We were told that we had to move

away...Because we were used to our land and we didn't say we didn't want to move away – although we had a hall, if it had been at the hall that people were gathered together, they could have spoken up to say they did not want to move away...it was because we couldn't talk in church..."

(William Onalik, in BRICE-BENNETT 1977: 109)

I remember that there was a meeting held by Hettasche, Peacock, Rockwood, and Dr. Paddon. We had a community hall, but the meeting was held at the Moravian Church. They didn't say why [it was held there]. We knew that in the church, we couldn't say anything. I guess that is the reason why the meeting was held at the church.... They said to us that the mountains were too high for aircraft, and that Hebron was too far for ships that brought the freight. Today all transportation methods are no problem.

(Sabina Nochasak, Hopedale, interview with author, 2000)

Yes, that was in Hebron. My grandfather Joshua Obed – not my real grandfather – he made a speech before we left. That was on the wharf. Everybody was real quiet. Couldn't hear anything, no one spoke; only Joshua was speaking. He preached. He said, 'I am leaving the land I love so much.' He sang a hymn, I don't remember the hymn, he sang it for the people of Hebron. He said, 'wherever you go, God will always be with you.' After he stopped singing the people shoved off. Everyone broke down after his speech because no one wanted to leave, they had no choice, the governments knew that we couldn't go against them.

The strangest thing I wonder about is, I also heard this from older people, that they had to go to church, inside the church, so they won't say anything, because they're not allowed to talk back in church or swear, they listened well inside church. Sometimes I feel it could have been different inside the community hall, I don't know why they chose the church, there was lots of room in the hall. Maybe we were tricked in some way into leaving our homeland. Sometimes I think, I wish I would move back again, live it all over again, but going back you know, it wouldn't make much sense. All your family's gone, your mother's gone, your grandfather is gone, your dad is gone, everybody's gone. Who is going to lead the way?

(Boas Kairtok, interview with author, 2000)

The *Katimak* and its spaces was a privileged public forum in Labrador Inuit culture. There were acceptable forms of speech-making and rhetoric that took place around them – both formal and informal ways of expressing opinion and dissent. In their memories, Hebronimiut indicate that a church was a very different kind of space than a community hall. The hall was the seat of Inuit governance and the open space wherein the public culture of the Inuit – a culture built around the *katimak*, speechmaking, and consensual decisions – was founded. It was in the hall where the life of the community was merged into the life of the land through the administration of the Elders customary law (*malikgaksait*). Inuit community elders had led the construction of the halls in the late 1940s and early 1950s. They raised the money through subscriptions, cut and milled the lumber themselves, and built them largely without the assistance of outsiders. In Labrador Inuit culture, the community halls of the 1950s harkened back to the large communal snowhouses – the so-called *kashims* or gaming houses (See TAYLOR 1990) – that were a

feature of traditional Inuit culture throughout the Canadian Arctic.

But what do we make of the deafening silence of Inuit? To some of the administrators present, it symbolized Inuit acceptance of and resignation to their fate. The Hebron missionary narrated the religious implications of this view.

*We had a gathering in Church with the congregation closing Hebron settlement in an official way in a church service, with God's help and so on. Despite my feeling against the move or the uncertainty, I should say I mean I would not obstruct it if that was the better thing, yes, I'd say yes, I wasn't sure. However, this service gave me a feeling of happiness feeling that the people now seem to understand and accept it **as if out of God's hands**. We have here no abiding city but we carry on our life further south.*

Rev. Sigfried Hettasch, from *The Relocation of Hebron*, OKalaKatiget Society Television (1987)

That last line, “We have here no abiding city,” comes from Hebrews (13:14), while the expression “As if out of God’s Hands”, invokes the spirit of an old Moravian decision-making technique called “the Lot,” in which a marked ballot was taken to indicate divine preference for a proposition. Early Moravians under the influence of Count Zinzendorf consulted the Lot on a wide range of church and community policy, but it fell out of favour by the mid-19th century. Ironically, the Lot was meant to limit conflict over important matters and achieving community solidarity by invoking God’s blessing on important decisions.

Most sympathetic commentators have argued that, to the Inuit, the church symbolized Moravian authority and compliance; it was not a space where dissent, debate, or contention could be developed. Also, the presence of all these Kablunak officials may have given Inuit the perception that they were powerless (*e.g.* BRICE-BENNETT 1994: 102). But my reading of Moravian-Inuit relations is that there was an awful lot of coercion but very little compliance. The elders had impressive spiritual and civic authority and they were not pushovers to anyone. However, Christianity and the church space were important parts of the basis for that authority. Some mastery of the Christian arts of singing, admonishing, resolving, and most importantly, preaching, were essential to being recognized as a leader by others and by outside agencies. The church was the space where these things were practiced. But it was also the one place where the Elders authority was diminished in the presence of the ordained missionary. So although the arts were practiced in the church, they received their full expression in the halls. In the church, some are free, but in the hall, all were free.

Is it possible that the administrators were casually unaware of Inuit attitudes toward the church space, and free speech? That this was not intentional? Interestingly, the Moravians did not, as a rule, privilege the church as sacred space over any other place where the faithful might gather. The Hebron church, for instance, was not merely church but attached dwelling house as well, and it invited other uses—including vegetable

storage. Inuit silence indicates a different sense of sacred space among Inuit—a greater recognition of the church as a “cultic” environment.

In any case, Inuit silence meant that much of the “contestedness” of the meeting would remain hidden in the hearts of the relocates for some time. But there was another sense in which the meeting was contested that made itself known immediately: at the moment of dispossession, the administrators could not agree on who, exactly, was responsible for closing Hebron. This debate first emerged on the pages of the Hebron guestbook, which the visitors signed before their departure.

April 10/59	W. Rockwood	St. John’s, Nfld.	“Tava” (?)	On the occasion of the Mission “Confirmation” of closing Hebron station.
/59	F.W. Peacock	Happy Valley, Labrador		On the occasion of the Government decision to close Hebron. I wrote this first! – True, W.R.
	W.A. Paddon	North West River		(Innocent by-stander)
	Geoffrey Henderson			Pilot of the get-away car EYW. [airplane pilot]
	W.C. Shupe	(“Commissioner Future”)		Pursuer of the above car. [RCMP]
	Ian W. Mackie	(?)		
	F.C.P. Grubb			How are the mighty fallen. [Nain missionary]

(Hebron Guestbook, OkalaKatiget Archives)

Signing the guestbook for a village whose fate you have just sealed seems odd, but between the Moravian and government officials, ceremony was everything. It’s apparent that the officials conducted this ceremony of dispossession—the meeting, the reading and posting of declarations—for the sake of one another, as a sign from agency to agency, to demarcate and disavow responsibility of the relocation—and not as a communication to Inuit. As I said earlier, that was a network from which Inuit had been excluded. The Inuit were not their audience.

The administrator’s disavowals grew more intensive as the years passed. In 1987, Walter Rockwood said:

...It wasn’t a good move. As the (Labrador) Royal Commission said, it was a failure. And I wasn’t the one who advocated it. But being a civil servant, I had to do as I was told. I couldn’t throw my weight around. I would have had no influence...Personally, my sympathies were with the Hebron people... And my sympathies were with the Hebron people all the way through, and at no time did I put in writing that I recommended closing Hebron, at no time.

(ROCKWOOD, OKALAKATIGET 1987)

Reverend FW Peacock’s disavowals were at odds with all other descriptions of the meeting:

However, I pointed out that the final decision was not mine, or Mr. Rockwood’s or Dr. Paddon’s, the decision was theirs and theirs alone. I then passed the meeting over to my colleague the

Hebron missionary, the Reverend SP Hettasch, who asked for comments from the audience. Several said they would be sorry to leave Hebron but they felt it would be an easier life in the south. After some short discussion a vote was taken and the congregation agreed without dissent to leave Hebron for the South. There was nothing sinister about this meeting, as some have suggested, everything was on the level and above board. No coercion, no pressure, merely a presentation which was received and agreed to.

Newspaper reporters, politicians and university researchers and extension workers have sometimes made statements regarding this meeting which were entirely untrue and indeed many of these critics have played upon the nostalgia and the emotions of some of the old Hebronimut in a deliberate attempt to make their own preconceived notions appear correct.” (PEACOCK 1981)

Conclusion

I take Inuit silence as a signpost to where resistance might be found: in the culture of the halls, the *katimak*, and the camp. Inuit have put a lot of maintenance into the memory of that meeting. While this itself is a kind of resistance, it is also, I believe, a way of talking about the relocation while avoiding the truly horrible bits. In their way, the Inuit oral (and written) accounts of the meeting are more stable than the shifting accounts of the administrators. They are rooted in a very different public culture – one that hasn't been broken up into *publics* and different audiences, as the world of the administrators had, by 1959. Further, the Inuit accounts contain details that do not exist in the bureaucratic archive – details about what was spoken at the meeting, for instance. I'm convinced that many of these details are true, partly because the legacy-obsessed administrators disagree on exactly those details.

As I set out at the beginning, however, the relocations were conducted as a consequence of Inuit exclusion from new networks of decision making set up after Confederation. This also meant that Inuit had reduced access to the workings of government. As a result, they've tended to blame the people on the ground such as Reverend Hettasch and Walter Rockwood, who were both opposed to closing Hebron but powerless to stop the process. So these oral accounts, despite their stability, demand the same analytical attention as the reports of the administrators.

I leave the final word to Mr. Rockwood. When he donated the archives detailing his many long years in Labrador affairs – beginning with the Newfoundland Ranger Force in 1938 – he seemed to sense that history would come eventually to look at the material with a critical eye. On the file marked “Hebron,” he left the following cover note, which I take as a warning against the archives of other administrators:

“William James

On his desk when he died, there lay a paper on which he had written his last, and perhaps his most characteristic, sentences: ‘There is no conclusion. What has concluded that we might conclude in regard to it? There are no fortunes to be told, and there is no advice to be given. Farewell.’”

To cite this publication:

EVANS, Peter. “Easter 1959: Oral and Written Memories of a Contested Event.” In Collignon B. & Therrien M. (eds). 2009. *Orality in the 21st century: Inuit discourse and practices. Proceedings of the 15th Inuit Studies Conference*. Paris: INALCO.

<http://www.inuitoralityconference.com>

References

BRICE-BENNETT, Carol

1977 *Our Footprints Are Everywhere: Inuit Land Use and Occupancy in Labrador*, Nain, Labrador Inuit Association.

1994 “The Redistribution of the Northern Labrador Inuit Population: A Strategy for Integration and Formula Conflict,” *Zeitschrift fur Kanada-Studien* 2(26): 95-106.

OKALAKATIGET SOCIETY

1987 *The Relocation of Hebron*, Nain, OKalaKatiget Society.

PEACOCK, F. W.

1981 *The Goodly Heritage*. Unpublished manuscript held in Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archive, St. John’s, NL.

TAYLOR, G.

1990 “The Labrador Inuit Kashim (Ceremonial House) Complex,” *Arctic Anthropology* 27(2): 51-67.

Archives

Public Archives of Newfoundland Labrador.

Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archive.

OKalaKatiget Archives.