

# Nation, Indigenization, the Beothuk: A Newfoundland Myth of Origin in Patrick Kavanagh's *Gaff Topsails*

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THE NARRATIVE OF A NATIONAL CULTURE often begins with a “foundational myth,” a story that, as Stuart Hall writes, “locates the origin of the nation, the people, and their national character so early that they are lost in the mists of, not ‘real,’ but ‘mythic’ time” (614). In national narratives “national identity is represented as primordial. . . . The essentials of the national character remain unchanged through all the vicissitudes of history. It is there from birth, unified and continuous, ‘changeless’ throughout all the changes, eternal” (614). For postcolonial nations such origin myths are useful for constructing an identity that preceded, and therefore exists in defiance of, “the ruptures of colonization,” and that unifies many cultures and societies into “one people” (614). But what about invader-settler colonies? While motivated by the same desire to create a national identity that stands against the imperial motherland, these states cannot construct their origins quite so easily, for the “narrative of the nation” must begin with the troublesome moment of colonial invasion, or must erase the First Peoples from the land, or must adopt an origin myth that somehow fuses aboriginal and settler identity.

This is a problem that has been noted and considered by many Canadian writers and literary scholars over the last half century, perhaps most notably Northrop Frye. He laments that the Canadian “literary mind was established on a basis, not of myth, but of history,” and consequently finds Canada’s an immature literary tradition (231). Many white Canadian novelists have responded by writing their own myths of origin, in order to construct a “primordial” national identity to counteract the guilt of colonization. In his 1996 novel *Gaff Topsails*, Patrick Kavanagh creates just such a myth of origin for the inhabitants of a small, fictional Catholic parish in Newfoundland.

The bulk of the novel follows the parish's inhabitants as they go about their lives on a single day in 1948: Michael Barron and Mary Dwyer stand on the brink of maturity; Michael's pious brother Kevin wrestles with the terror of his own adolescence; the sour priest is haunted by the past he has spent years trying to escape; and the old lighthouse keeper raves around the parish in a never-ending quest for drink. Interspersed within this twentieth-century story, however, are chapters that go back in time to the area's "prehistory," to what Mircea Eliade calls the epoch of myth. Kavanagh's origin myth unfolds primarily in the chapter "The Kingdom of God," in which he describes the fictional Irish castaway Tomas Croft, who settles in Newfoundland just prior to colonization and populates the island with a new clan. This myth haunts the story at every turn — the young lovers Michael and Mary are echoes of Tomas Croft and his Irish Princess, Sheila. The parish's combination of pagan tradition and staunch Catholicism is directly linked to Croft and his life. While the majority of the action takes place on a single day in 1948, then, this one day may be regarded not as a single unit but as part of a continuous thread of time stretching back five centuries or more.

In this paper, I will show how Kavanagh's origin story reconfigures the colonial moment as a myth of indigenous birth. And I will argue that this origin myth is an attempt to write a national narrative — not of Canada as a whole, but of Newfoundland. The myth serves to distance Newfoundlanders both from colonial exploiters and from the Canadian identity that looms beyond this moment on the eve of Confederation.

Kavanagh's origin myth begins with God's creation of the Earth, in a short chapter called "The Landlocked Archipelago." We are told that "at the end of the sixth day, He tosses the refuse of His labours into a rubbish heap. The debris falls in the north salt seas, far from the remainder of His creation" (22). This "mass of debris sorts and settles itself" into an island, which, grinded by ice, becomes a barren and "penitential place" (26).

The myth continues in the chapter "The Kingdom of God" with the arrival of a small group of monks in search of a Promised Land, an allusion to the legendary journey of St. Brendan in the fifth century A.D. Debate still exists over whether or not St. Brendan "discovered" Newfoundland a thousand years before Cabot. Kavanagh's monks' journey is guided by crystal basilicas and plagued by encounters with fiery devils — all elements found in the medieval texts recounting St. Brendan's journey. But upon landing on the island, the monks "find only desolation. Spying on the naked

rock neither plant nor animal nor — despite the penitential terrain — any saint, they decide this is not after all the Promised Land. It is the Land God Gave to Cain” (91).<sup>1</sup> Next come a ship of “northmen” who, having pillaged all of Ireland, seek new spoils. They too are guided by icebergs, and also escape “fiery slag hurled by monsters from a black thundering fortress” (92). Once they arrive, they “prowl the land” for several weeks, and then after a night of mad drinking they run into the sea and are drowned. Thus neither the most holy of men, nor the roughest marauders, can survive this place. Rather, it is a combination of the two, of Christian piety and pagan roughness, that seems to be required to live here. It is just this combination that is manifested in Tomas Croft. And it is this ability to survive the severity of the landscape that will become, for Kavanagh’s Newfoundlanders, a badge of nationalistic honour.

Croft’s story begins in a fifteenth-century Ireland that is ravaged by famine. The son of a monk, he spends his childhood confined within the walls of a monastery. But when his father dies of starvation, he is forced out into the countryside where he survives on the flesh of the dead. When he reaches the sea, he is drawn into the bowels of a ship by its holy name, *Trinitie*, and the smell of raw fish. When he is discovered by the ship’s gruff crew, he is only saved by the captain’s superstition that a stowaway is a good omen, and he exists on the ship in constant fear for his life.

Not long into their journey, the ship is pulled by an unknown current, and with no wind they are drawn far off course. The same mythical elements that the monks and Vikings encountered reappear here, and the repetition reinforces the supernatural quality of the North Atlantic and the island itself. Croft’s adventures as a stowaway on the *Trinitie* also beg comparison with Homer’s *Odyssey*, as the ship is transported into new and strange territory by an unseen force. The ship is pelted with fiery rocks, recalling not only St. Brendan’s tale but also the boulders thrown at Odysseus by the Laestrygonians. As the ship passes through the field of icebergs, the men hear female voices, the “eternal call of lonely women” (101). The moment inevitably recalls the sirens Odysseus’s men encounter; one sailor in fact cries “*sirens!*” at the sound. Other Greek myths are also evoked; later, the sea seems to boil with “a snarl of hideous serpents, a mass of hydra heads — a thousand Gorgons” (102).

Kavanagh does leave these mythical elements open to rational explanation. The shower of fiery rocks may well be an eruption of many submarine volcanoes in the vicinity of Iceland. As readers, we may know that icebergs

“sing” when pockets of air are released. And the “Gorgons” are explained by the text itself: “the ocean is alive not with lizards, or eels, or sea snakes, or octopi, or monitors, or dragons but with codfish” (103). Is Kavanagh, then, undermining or subverting his own mythology? I don’t think so. The codfish are so plentiful that the sailors are able to simply scoop them into the boat with baskets, a phenomenon that is as “every bit as startling” (103) as the vision of the Gorgons. *Reality* is as remarkable as fantasy; the history of Newfoundland is worthy of mythical status.

Allusions to Greek myth are not the only elements of terror and legend. The ship is enveloped in a thick and disorienting fog, and “so thick is the mist that the clang of the bell echoes back, from above and from all quarters, as if the ship itself is snared inside a great carillon. The very wetness of the atmosphere quenches lanterns” (98). Later, the ship is encased with a thick frost, which “swells, like a living membrane, faster than the crew can hack it away” (100). What is significant here, more than the content of these scenes, is the overall atmosphere of mystery and supernatural power, the awareness that we have entered a mythic mode.

Kavanagh’s use of mythical images puts Croft’s journey in a different narrative mode from historical accounts of later colonial exploration and discovery. As Herb Wyile notes, many contemporary historical novels use both myth and oral conventions to resist “the dominance of writing, rationality, and empiricist historiography — all features of an alienating modern, technological society.” Many novelists turn to myth “as a trace of pre-industrial, premodern, oral cultures and their knowledges,” suggesting the “privileging of an ostensibly more simple and primitive world view as a kind of nostalgic retreat from modernity” (187). The use of myth suggests, then, the rejection of the imperial motherland in favour of more vernacular, even “indigenous” forms. This is one of many strategies Kavanagh employs to distinguish Croft from history’s colonial invaders, and to establish a connection between the ancestor and a primordial, pagan culture.

At first glance, then, it may seem that Kavanagh is deploying what Marie Vauthier, following Margery Fee, has termed “New World Myth.” New World Myth flaunts its opposition “to the European-inspired versions of the past(s) of the New World.” It “involves a reclaiming of the past that frequently works *against* ‘original’ — that is to say, European — versions of past events” (Vauthier x). But while Kavanagh is in part rejecting European history, his use of myth is much more conservative. New World Myth “introduces not only a notion of flexibility but also a social, political, historical,

and temporal component into the traditional concept of myth as something immutable, eternal, and, especially transhistorical” (Vauthier 35). It opposes the “origin/divine paradigm” of traditional myth (6); it suggests the disruptions, deviations, and multiple perspectives of Foucaultian genealogy, which rejects the pursuit of essential origins. Kavanagh’s myth is the opposite; it *depends* upon the immutable, eternal, and transhistorical. While his myth is oriented in the “new world,” and in opposition to European history, it is *built* upon a teleological story of “miraculous origin” (Foucault 145).

Croft’s journey, then, has not just a classical but a Biblical, even apocalyptic, resonance. As fiery rocks fall on the ship and the surrounding waters, the sailors pray to Saint Elmo, and the thunder and falling rock cease. When icebergs appear out of the fog and threaten to crush the ship “like the jaws of a titanic vise” (100), the sailors pray to Saint Peter Gonzalez. The thundering and groaning “abruptly stop. The ice then grips the hull strangely, cradling the vessel plumb and safe in the water” (100). As an unknown land comes into sight, the ship seems to have been guided to the new world by a divine hand.

But the crew scarcely care about the land when they discover the abundance of cod, and greedily fill the ship to overflowing with fish. When the sailors drop with exhaustion, Croft steals a rowboat and rows to the vacant shore under cover of night. The ship sails away the next day and is never heard from again. While the monks and Vikings found the place barren and inhospitable, when Croft arrives in Newfoundland there is a sense of rebirth into an Edenic landscape. He is surrounded by a multitude of vegetation and wildlife, including woodlands “populated with every sort of God’s creature. Sleek wolves, giant hares, slinking silver foxes, black bears, lynx-leopards — all these animals are harmless to Tomas Croft” (113). As he climbs the cliff to survey his new terrain, the wind “pushes Tomas Croft up the slope like the hand of God” (110), and he “judges that this land is blessed, that God Almighty has smiled down upon it His fertility and His benevolence” (113). It is as though the rightful or natural inhabitant of the island had to arrive before the land’s wealth could be revealed. As Foucault explains, the origin evokes the divine: “the origin always precedes the Fall. It comes before the body, before the world and time; it is associated with the gods, and its story is always sung as a theogony” (143). This is the moment of genesis, when divine creation is completed by the addition of man. Not only is Tomas Croft in a blessed land, he is at one with the land, enmeshed with it. As he listens

to the “breath” of the tide, “it seems that this glowing breath is nothing less than his own being, his own life and soul and spirit” (108).

While Adrian Fowler argues that the image of Newfoundland as the refuse heap of creation makes the title “The Kingdom of God” ironic (“Myth” 79), here it no longer seems that way. Rather, the title reveals the natural affinity between this place and its new patriarch. The Newfoundland coat of arms that Kavanagh describes later in the chapter bears the motto from Matthew, “seek ye the Kingdom of God.” But by applying the phrase “The Kingdom of God” to a chapter that describes the settlement of Newfoundland, Kavanagh suggests that the Kingdom of God has not just been sought, but found.

The word “kingdom” in this phrase is just as significant as the word “God.” It signals power and rule over a contained community. Kavanagh’s tale embraces a religiosity that, as Benedict Anderson argues, preceded modern nationalism. Religious thought, Anderson contends, transforms “fatality into continuity,” contributing to an imagined community between the “dead and the yet unborn” (11). While Anderson argues that modern nationalism comprises a similar but secular transformation of fatality into continuity, necessitated by the “dusk of religious modes of thought” (11), Kavanagh combines the two, folding the tradition of religious continuity into a nation-building project. Kavanagh’s Newfoundland, then, looms “out of an immemorial past” (Anderson 12); it embodies what Anderson calls the religious “cultural roots” of modern nationalist imagining. As Kavanagh draws from Christianity to establish his origin myth, he turns “chance into destiny” (Anderson 12). He establishes a community that, through both nationalistic and religious means, becomes “eternal” (Anderson 12, Kavanagh 140).

The idea of divine destiny is of course highly problematic in colonial contexts. Claiming a divine directive behind Croft’s arrival on the island of Newfoundland positions him as a natural inheritor of the landscape; he is placed there by God, just as Adam is placed in Eden. Croft’s descendants, then, are positioned as indigenous; their right seems to override those of both the First Nations (to which we will turn in a moment) and the Protestant English colonists. Kavanagh’s novel is thus an interesting example of what Terry Goldie has termed “indigenization,” the process through which “the ‘settler’ population attempts to become as though indigenous, as though ‘born’ of the land” (“Man”).

Goldie notes several thematic and rhetorical strategies that perform this

work in fiction. One such strategy is “individuation,” in which “the character gains a new awareness of self and of nationality through an excursion into the wilderness” (*Fear* 46). More than an “excursion,” Croft’s entire life is wilderness. He mimics animal voices and eats his food raw. He constructs a shelter of boughs and sod and mud which “harmonizes with the landscape so thoroughly that it deceives the eye and becomes invisible” (117). When other Europeans arrive in the cove and begin to construct a settlement, Croft is able to hide himself completely in the camouflage of his hut. He thus repeats a common pattern in which the character “partly removes the civilization which is seen to be inimical to his or her indigenization” (Goldie, *Fear* 47). He is distinguished from other European settlers by his habitation in the natural world.

As Croft builds a life on the island, he becomes a mythical figure himself. As the new English settlement grows, he keeps himself hidden, pilfering from the camps at night and lighting mysterious fires in the woods. Croft steals the Irish princess Sheila nGira away from her English captors and together they produce ten daughters, who marry the non-English convicts and outcasts from the settlements, and the family survives on piracy, looting, and violence. The Englishmen tell tales of the “Boo Darby,” the evil “Masterless Man” who haunts the island, and light their own bonfires once a year on the Feast of St. John the Baptist, to ward off the evil.

Croft also takes the place of the fabled hostile natives that characterize colonial invasions. Incensed by the thefts Croft commits under cover of night, the admiral swears that the countryside is tormented by “a tribe of thieving savages” (124). Croft is indigenized by both his actions and by this mistake of identity. Interpellated as a savage, he becomes a savage, with its meanings of both fierce wild man and primitive native. This characterization fits in with what Goldie calls the “Celtic connection” (26), the common implication that “the process of indigenization is easier for the Celts, because of their own association with an unstructured, free nature” (27) or the image of “Celtic savages” who are “primitive” in nature and partake in cannibalism (26).

Even as the settlement grows and the family no longer has to hide from the English, they are still distinct from their neighbours. Croft’s daughters and their husbands all settle alongside him because “nobody else will tolerate such people” (126). They live in “destitution,” and “the husbands confound the Gaelic spoken on the beach by adding so many other languages of Europe that the family develops a pidgin Irish all its own. Grandchildren

arrive and the family becomes a clan, united by blood, by speech, and by the sheer physical authority of Tomas Croft" (126). The clan is racialized as "red-headed bog Irish,"<sup>2</sup> and with a distinct language their identity as non-English is complete.

Pagan myth and Christianity are once again united when a priest lands on Croft's shore, reigniting in Croft the Catholic piety he learned from his long-dead father. Croft pushes his family into reform, and for the rest of his life they live as honest and hardworking Catholics. But the myth that was Tomas Croft, the myth of the "Boo Darby," continues even after his reform. It continues, in fact, for centuries after his death, so that the people of the parish on this summer solstice in 1948 gather for the traditional bonfire to ward off the evil.

Kavanagh admires writers like Hardy, Lowry, and Joyce "because they give everyday life a classic quality. They relate the mundane to the eternal in such a way that the reader comes to sense not just the immediate story, but some other, grander tale that may have taken place centuries back" (Vandervlist). Kavanagh's origin myth, his "grander tale" from "centuries back," seems to be his attempt, then, to relate the mundane aspects of life in post-war Newfoundland not just to an ancient lineage, but to an "eternal" identity. By writing characters "infused with the blood" ("Penguin" 3) of Tomas and Sheila, Kavanagh invites his readers to equate the characters of Mary, Michael and Kevin Barron, and Mary's mother with the "essence" of these genetic or geographical ancestors; the Catholic piety, the pagan superstition, and the life of simple hard work. This essentialism becomes plain as Croft's descendants are described:

They still dream the dreams they did in the forgotten days of Tomas Croft. Their tongues speak the same polyglot of English and Irish and thieves' Latin. Ashore, their scythes mow the meadows with the same sway and swing as did the scythes of their forebears. Afloat, their oars ply the waters with the same steady stroke. In the modern century, all these rhythms echo the pattern that they echoed in the time of Tomas Croft — the touch of the sea upon the land. (139)

The origin myth does not stand alone, but marks the other characters in the novel with a particular identity. The myth becomes a way of understanding who they are.

At several key points in the novel, seemingly random lists of a wide range of fragmentary events are used to indicate the passing of centuries. The first few lists are global in scope. But the final list, which takes up nearly an entire



page and brings us to the present moment in 1948, collapses significant Newfoundland events in a mess of fragments: “Lord Baltimore abducts a harem. Captain William Jackman rescues twenty-seven people from drowning. Fishermen catch monsters in their nets. The *Great Eastern* unrolls a telegraph cable across the bed of the ocean to surface at a place called Heart’s Content” etcetera (138). But this is not a genealogical attempt to reveal the world as a “profusion of entangled events,” to disrupt traditional history’s “pretended continuity” (Foucault 155, 154). Rather, the parish is unaffected by these changes or the passage of time. In fact, the parish’s history stands in direct contrast to the disparate collection of events on the previous page. The passage continues: “in the modern century, the descendants of Tomas Croft hardly notice ... that any time has passed” (139). Kavanagh emphasizes and privileges the linear quality of the story when he explains that, “since most of the novel dances from character to character,” he created “The Kingdom of God” because he “felt the need to include at least one lengthy stretch of old-fashioned straightforward narrative. I wanted to demonstrate that I was capable of telling a story from beginning to end” (“Penguin” 6). Kavanagh traces this story through, or despite, the disparate fragments of history. He creates a work of fiction that finds order and a stable cultural identity amid the chaos of the modern world.

Anderson argues that modern persons and nations experience the same awareness of being embedded in “serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of ‘forgetting’ the experience of this continuity” (205). This condition of remembering the past in fragments creates the modern need for a “narrative of ‘identity’” (205), in order to fill the gaps and create a continuous account. But the difference between people and nations, Anderson argues, is that nations “have no clearly identifiable births.... Because there is no Originator, the nation’s biography can not be written evangelically, ‘down time,’ through a long procreative chain of begettings” (205). In order to counter this feeling of discontinuity, Kavanagh *creates* his nation’s “identifiable birth,” its “Originator.” The narrative makes up for that which cannot be remembered, thereby formulating a conception of identity (Anderson 204). As Vauthier notes, “the presence of myth in literature has frequently been tied to the rise of nationalist sentiment” (24). The search for, or creation of, myths has often been seen as essential to the legitimization of a nation’s existence (Vauthier 24).

Pat Byrne writes of this process in a Newfoundland context. He suggests that Newfoundland literature must overcome “the sense of dislocation

and discontinuity caused by the upheavals which have occurred since the 1930's," particularly Confederation, by reconstructing the past and creating a cultural continuity that extends from the present moment through a history several centuries old. This past is not restricted to historical fact, but rather places significant importance on what he calls "regional mythology" (59). For Byrne, this mythology often involves either the romanticized image of the hardy Newfoundlander who has heroically survived the harsh landscape, or the negative "image of the Newfoundlander as a species of northern Caliban, a barely civilized half-brute" (62). Elements of both are evident in Croft. His survival alone on the island is, as Fowler notes, "highly improbable," as is his circumnavigation of the island by rowboat. These, Fowler argues, "are the feats of a mythological character" ("Myth" 80). But he is not only a hardy hero, but also a raw flesh-eating, murderous thief who lacks knowledge of civilized society. As Fowler argues, he also represents "what has become one of the defining myths of Newfoundland, that of the Newfoundlander as outlaw" ("Myth" 86). We are thus able to relate these cultural stereotypes back to a single mythological originator or father figure. Succumbing to these stereotypes, or "mythologies," allows Kavanagh to place his characters and their culture within a larger continuous narrative of cultural development.

Despite the prevailing unflattering image, Kavanagh idealizes this timeless continuity with romantic language: "The steady come and go of the tidewater speaks the pledge of Tomas Croft to his children: eternal constancy. The dream-breath of the landwash, the sigh of the sea upon the shore, proclaims the easeful sound of warm snug love — the plain silent sound of home" (140). But while he privileges "eternal constancy," Kavanagh's essentialism is problematic because it reduces Newfoundlanders of remote outports to a homogenized clan of simple, superstitious and often two-dimensional characters. Kavanagh is not just writing a story set in 1948, he is fixing the Newfoundland parish in anachronistic space:

If the people of the womb-cove should hear the drone of an airplane behind the clouds, or the horn of a steamer passing through the fog, or, in the calm of night, the moan of a locomotive sounding down the corridors of the land, they might take any of these sounds to be the lament of the Boo Darby, suffering in beastly solitude somewhere in the wilderness.

Although it is now the age of science and reason, the people of the cove still fear the Masterless man, who carries off to the barrens any children he can catch. (139)

While Kavanagh seems to be attempting to forge a distinct and rich history for his compatriots, the claim that the people of the parish would not recognize the sound of an airplane or a locomotive, that they live outside of “science and reason,” is clearly problematic. He admits that his intention was to retrieve his own memories of Newfoundland and “fix them once and for all on the printed page” (4). But in so “fixing” them, outside of time, he condemns his Newfoundlanders to the stereotype of primitive, backward simple-mindedness that is often propagated by mainland Canada; by fixing them in his “womb-cove” he confines them in timeless infancy.

Speaking about the novel generally, Kavanagh told Harry Vandervlist that “my goal was not a documentary but a novel — and I signal this by refusing to use the word Newfoundland anywhere in the text. Strictly speaking, *Gaff* is not ‘about’ Newfoundland at all. It is a made-up story.” But while Kavanagh at times may claim a creative distance from Newfoundland history, his novel is undeniably grounded in Newfoundland. The lyrics to “The Ode to Newfoundland,” sprinkled throughout the novel, confirm the setting even if other specific cultural and geographic references do not. The use of the Ode also suggests that the parish itself is not a unique place, but that it rather represents the island as a whole, and that its story is a synecdoche for the history of Newfoundland.

The use of names drawn from Newfoundland history also reinforce this synecdochic quality. Tomas Croft was in reality an Englishman who dispatched a fishing fleet around 1480 that returned reporting land in the west (“Penguin”). Kavanagh’s version of Sheila nGira is closer to the real historical figure; she was an Irish princess who was abducted by pirates on her way to France at the beginning of the 1600s. She was rescued by privateers on their way to Newfoundland, and was taken to the island with them. On the way she fell in love with and married the ship’s navigating officer, a man named Pike. Legend has it that Sheila’s first child was also the first child born in Newfoundland (“Princess”). Even the names of the ships that bring Sheila and the other settlers are real ships that formed part of the Gilbert Voyage to Newfoundland in 1583, one of the first modern European expeditions to the island (O’Flaherty 9). But despite the fact that the names are real, Kavanagh’s story is purely fictional. While Sheila nGira was one of the first women to settle in Newfoundland, she arrived later than Kavanagh would have it, and she stayed married to Pike, founding a long line of Newfoundland Pikes. In fact, Kavanagh compresses events that occurred over a span of several centuries into Croft’s lifetime. By using real

names drawn from cultural memory in his fictional story, Kavanagh balances the mythical elements with recognizable references, reinforcing the feeling of historical continuity. But if he wanted to give his story factual legitimacy, why did he not tell the equally engaging legend of Sheila nGira and Gilbert Pike as it has been widely reconstructed?

Kavanagh's version has several important effects. It emphasizes the Irish roots of the characters, whereas Gilbert Pike, Sheila's real husband, was an English aristocrat. Kavanagh admits that the influence of Irish writers like Joyce led to a strong Celtic tradition in the novel. But more significantly, Kavanagh explains that about half of Newfoundland's population traces its roots to southeast Ireland, and he claims "I grew up feeling myself to be Irish as much as anything" ("Penguin" 5). When asked if his characters feel a sense of exile from Ireland, Kavanagh replies that "my characters are more likely to feel, as I do, not that they are exiled from Ireland, but that Irishness is a natural part of their Newfoundland makeup" ("Penguin" 7). By highlighting the Irishness of the ancestors, Kavanagh is not writing a novel of the Irish diaspora, but rather establishing the foundation of what he perceives to be the Newfoundland identity. Constructing Tomas Croft as the son of a monk emphasizes and explains the strong religious influence on the community, but it also allows Kavanagh to emphasize the mythical quality of the story. Apparently motherless, the product of an abandoned monastery where he grew up completely cut off from the world, Tomas Croft originates from a family or community that is lapsed. His founding of the new clan in Newfoundland, then, is not simply a continuation of an old culture, but a new creation with the weight of religious tradition behind it.

While it highlights Irish roots, then, Kavanagh's myth simultaneously disconnects the people of the 1940s parish — descendants of Tomas Croft's clan — from the British colonizers of the sixteenth century, the Pikes and the other very real explorers who came on the *Golden Hind*, the *Delight*, and the *Squirrel*. This is another move to indigenize Croft's clan. Throughout the chapter, Kavanagh continually emphasizes the animosity between the British fishery and the Irish "bog-papists" (127). The exploitative class system wherein "merchants accept cured codfish, on which they set the value, for gear and supplies, for which they set the price" (128) depicts the impoverished Irish settlers as the victims of the colonial system, as the colonized.

There is perhaps some justification for this sentiment, given the extreme destitution of many settlers and the exploitation that often led to their starvation. As Johnston and Lawson explain, this is a characteristic problem of the

“second world”: settlers “were frequently characterized in domestic cultural and political discourses as ungovernable, uncluttered: as ‘colonials’ they were second-class — belated or feral — Englishmen, and often came to be seen as political or economic rivals to the domestic citizens of the ‘home’ country.” They add that “these factors produced, in many cases, the feeling of being colonized — of being European subjects but no longer European citizens” (363). This feeling of colonization has continued since Newfoundland was granted responsible government in 1855, since it achieved Dominion status in 1907, and, interestingly, even since Confederation with Canada in 1949. The referendum on Confederation was a close and highly controversial vote, and in the decades since Newfoundland nationalism has remained strong. The collapse of the fishery and disputes with Ottawa over control of oil resources have led to a feeling among some Newfoundlanders that in 1949 they simply traded British colonial rule for Canadian colonial rule.

The confederation question is not directly mentioned in *Gaff Topsails*. But as Adrian Fowler contends, since the novel is set on 24 June, 1948, between the two referenda on confederation with Canada, the impending change implicitly haunts the novel. Fowler writes that “the village is, for the most part, presented as a mythological rather than real community, representing the distilled essence of Newfoundland outport life at a moment when it was poised between the old and the new” (“Myth” 72). Fowler adds that while the villagers are “oblivious to [the day’s] historical import,” that though they seem “lost in time,” it is “the reader who sees in retrospect that, on the contrary, they occupy a moment that is fraught with change for their society and themselves” (73).

For Fowler, the phrase “burn yer boats,” shouted toward the end of the novel as the villagers are gathered around the bonfire, represents the confederate vision for the new industrialized Newfoundland. The slogan, an echo of a phrase attributed to Joey Smallwood, “signals not the demise of a society — although transfigured, Newfoundland continues to survive — but the demise of the mythos that informed the culture of that society” (“*Gaff*” 105). The context of this utterance makes this meaning clearer: several men emerge from the dark with a “coffin-like object,” which turns out to be a rotted dory, and “solemnly the men lay the boat on its nose and topple it into the fire. One or two people make the sign of the cross, others follow. A drunken little rat-faced man cackles, ‘Burn your boats, boys!’ but other voices, mortified, order him to silence” (431). In the ensuing moments, the iceberg that has spent the day on the horizon rolls and disappears. The

priest burns the clothes of the lighthouse keeper, who has rowed off naked to his death. And then “from the vicinity of the graveyard” come gunshots, which, together, “establish the slow measure of a knell” (432). This litany of death imagery is concluded with the remaining parishioners singing “The Ode to Newfoundland” around the fire, as if around a funeral pyre (433). The novel is full of rituals that have been renewed annually for the centuries since Croft’s time: the spawning of the caplin, the journey and demise of the icebergs, the maturation of children, who will then conceive their own offspring, the “Sweetheart’s Day” rituals, the annual bonfire. The lonely call of the “inevitable locomotive” (3) from the direction of the Gaff Topsail mountains is also part of this cycle of repetition. But those with knowledge of Newfoundland’s recent history will know that Confederation would ultimately bring about the demise of the Newfoundland railway. There is a sense here that even these eternal cycles may no longer be the same, that the community as it has been is under threat.

Kavanagh’s novel establishes a continuous culture inherited from a mythical origin, which remains largely unchanged for several hundred years. This “mythos” functions first to establish a Newfoundland national and cultural identity that is distinct from imperial Britain and from other provinces of Canada, and, second, to emphasize the profundity of the loss threatened by Confederation. Confederation is a common theme in Newfoundland literature, and is often accompanied by claims to what Harry Hiller calls a “nascent ethnicity.” According to Hiller, Newfoundlanders’ intense loyalty to homeland is founded on the fact that Newfoundland was once independent, and out of “the uniqueness of Newfoundland or what has been termed the ‘Newfoundland mystique.’ The isolation, the weather, and the dependence on the sea has supposedly bred a hardy people or a peculiar people ‘akin to a race’” (266). If Newfoundland has a unique culture and ethnicity, then Confederation means the loss of independence and the threat of assimilation. An “emergent nationalism” (Hiller 266) is therefore necessary to counteract these threatening forces, and it is this nationalism that is often manifested in literature.

This nationalism does not necessarily mean political separatism, but rather the maintenance of cultural or even ethnic difference. Thus Sandra Gwyn argued in the 1970s that the “Newfoundland Renaissance,” which she claimed was characterized by elements of folk tradition, was driven by the aftermath of Confederation, resettlement, the collapse of the fishery, and other threats to Newfoundland culture. The role of folk culture in

Newfoundland literature has continued in the decades since, and is often connected with cultural nationalism. Kenneth J. Harvey's *The Town that Forgot How to Breathe* (2003), for example, incorporates the ancient myths of fairies and sea monsters to emphasize the impact of the cod moratorium on Newfoundland culture. Many of Wayne Johnston's texts inspire nationalism by looking back at the circumstances of Confederation and Newfoundland's prevailing identity as "the country of no country" (*Baltimore's Mansion* 228), as a "land whose capacity to inspire wonder in all those who beheld it was in no way diminished by its being coloured the colour of Canada on maps" (88–89). In a recent special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* on Newfoundland literature, Stan Dragland notes that "I was struck almost as soon as I got here by how much of the nation remains, and I've come to see how persistently it's growing in a massive communal project of recovery and creation" (207). Similarly, Ronald Rompkey contends that Confederation did not hinder, but rather *led* to the establishment of Newfoundland as an "imagined community"; national identity was strengthened by the very threats to its existence. Kavanagh's novel is thus one of many that both preserves and constructs Newfoundland as an "imagined community" in defiance of Confederation.

But while nationalism can be a means of preserving or celebrating ethnicity, and a tool for countering assimilation, it can also be a form of erasure. According to Alan Lawson,

National identity is a form of identity politics: it is formulated as a strategy of resistance toward a dominant culture.... In the foundations of cultural nationalism, then, we can identify one vector of difference (the difference between colonizing subject and colonized subject: settler-Indigene) being replaced by another (the difference between colonizing subject and imperial centre: settler-imperium) in a strategic disavowal of the colonizing act. The national is what replaces the indigenous and in doing so conceals its participation in colonization by nominating a new colonized subject — the colonizer or invader-settler. (30)

By claiming a Newfoundland nation in opposition to both a British and Canadian imperial centre, Newfoundland literature often constructs an indigenized culture. It therefore risks erasing the reality of colonial violence and the extermination of the Beothuk, a disaster to which I will now turn.

Many Newfoundland writers have attempted to deal with the "extinction" of the Beothuk in their novels, poetry, and plays, with varying degrees of success. Many of these texts, and the problems of appropriation, essen-

tialization, and erasure associated with them, are outlined in Mary Dalton's article "Shadow Indians: The Beothuk Motif in Newfoundland Literature" (1992). Dalton argues that "literature about the Beothuks treats the Indian as emblem: the Noble Savage, the spirit of Nature, the past, the timeless, death, the source of wound for the European colonizers" (144). In the years since Dalton's article, many more texts have dealt with the Beothuk, most notably Bernice Morgan's *Random Passage* (1992) and Michael Crummey's *River Thieves* (2002). While Newfoundland writers like Morgan and Crummey are becoming increasingly interested in subversive or metafictional strategies of depicting the Beothuk, it is ultimately extremely difficult to avoid rendering them "shadow Indians" (Dalton 144). Because they are gone, they will never speak for themselves, and their appearance becomes about contemporary Newfoundland issues and preoccupations (Dalton 143). As Paul Chafe writes in his article on *River Thieves*, the "eradication" of the Beothuk is "the first great loss suffered by Newfoundland" (93); their demise becomes a mere chapter in Newfoundland's history.

Kavanagh's rendition of contact with the Beothuk unfolds in one short scene in "The Kingdom of God" when Croft is still alone on the island. He encounters a man in the woods:

It is a heathen, a man, clad in rough peltry, his flesh withered by the sun and painted ochre-red like the seacliffs. He wears on his person the skulls of birds and the claws of bears.

Neither one fearful of the other, Tomas Croft and the man come together. The heathen smiles and gestures towards the flaming red hair of the Christian, then reaches out his hand and grips it. Tomas Croft is alarmed, and without thinking he wheels his blackthorn swiftly and clubs the man until his brains spill out of his skull and onto the snow.

(118–119)

After a sleepless night hiding in fear of other "heathens," Croft gives the man "a Christian burial like the one he gave his own father" (119). This moment is significant not because it shows any remorse, but because it equates the Native with the father; if the father is indigenous then so too is the son. In an almost Oedipal moment Croft kills the father and takes his place. It is also significant that Croft's red hair, which racializes him as Irish throughout the novel (see, for example, 97, 124), is what draws the Beothuk man to him. The Beothuk's smile and gesture is a recognition of Croft's racial mark, and becomes the first step in the transfer of indigeneity. Once again the "Celtic connection" enables indigenization. As Margery Fee writes, "what is



enviable in the Native people ... from a nationalistic point of view, is their autochthonous claim to the land. Native people also possess all the other traits so important, in Romantic terms, to a great literature: an indigenous language and mythology, and a past filled with heroic deeds. Yet for the poet simply to identify with an Indian is rendered problematic by their cultural and ‘racial’ difference” (18). In *Gaff Topsails*, what is important is not the “racial” difference between the Beothuk and Croft, but the “racial” difference between Croft and the English.

After burying the Beothuk man, Tomas Croft “begins to feel lonely. No longer is he one with his new world. Somehow, he is broken and incomplete” (119). This moment of rupture — this fall — is an example of the “Beothuk extinction as wound,” a common trope in Newfoundland literature where the “prideful sense of being-at-home in the land” is imperilled by the shame of colonial violence (Dalton 139). The natural balance of this paradise has been ruptured. But as Dalton argues, while this trope may express guilt or sorrow at the “extinction,” there is a “grim irony” to this kind of text where “genocide ultimately is considered for its significance to the perpetrators” (140). While the reader may be critical of and sickened by Croft’s act of violence, the scene turns our attention from the dead man to his murderer, giving the killing the detachment of allegory. As he writes of Croft’s feeling of rupture from his new world, Kavanagh reduces the indigenous man’s presence to a part of the landscape; Croft feels spiritually disconnected from the *land* as a result of his act. As Dalton notes, the most enduring image of the Beothuk in Newfoundland literature focuses on their “unity with nature, their cousinship with tree and caribou and wolf” (136) — a stereotype associated with all aboriginal peoples. As they become a facet of landscape they are “dehumanized” (137), and their loss is therefore lamentable but not insurmountable. They become merely “an absent element of nature” (137).

Croft continues living his life in the place of the Native, and there is no one to challenge this position. The scene continues: “he takes it for granted that the *Trinitie* was lost and his mates were eaten by the sea, and that everyone in Ireland has starved. He comes to assume that he is the only soul alive in the entire world” (119). This solitary scene is Croft’s only encounter with the Beothuk, and the bloody murder of this one man stands in for the murder of an entire people. As Johnston and Lawson write, “The settler seeks to establish a nation, and therefore needs to become native and to write the epic of the nation’s origin. The ‘Origin’ is that which has no antecedent, so the presence of Ab-origines is an impediment.” (365). By reducing the

appearance of the Beothuk to a single page, and by eradicating them with a single blow, Kavanagh annihilates their role in Newfoundland's history, so that his own myth of origin may proceed unimpeded.

Terry Goldie argues that in Newfoundland the image of the indigene is inexorably "prehistoric and dead," representing "an indigenous past without a present, the indigene as corpse." The Beothuk therefore provide "a superior means of indigenization through their absence" (*Fear* 158):

There is a constant concern in Newfoundland with who is a 'native Newfoundlander.' This means in its essence that the individual was not only born in the province but is a product of generations of residents. The extinction of the Beothuks leaves no 'native' contradiction. Recent attempts by Micmacs<sup>3</sup> in Newfoundland to assert aboriginal tenure have been strongly opposed. The argument might be interpreted as 'We had natives. We killed them off. Now we are natives.' In a paradoxical equation, the claims of guilt allow a belief in the white as 'indigenous' which has not been possible for other Canadians since the nineteenth century. (*Fear* 157)

Kavanagh's myth is synecdochic of the process Goldie describes; as Croft "kills off" the solitary native, despite his (or Kavanagh's) feelings of guilt, he becomes native himself, and spawns many generations of natives. The death of the Beothuk enables what Goldie calls a "sense of both completion and cosmic moment. There seems to be an inevitable attraction in teleology, in providing an ending to the story. The ethnography of an extinct people is assuredly complete" (*Fear* 155). For indigenization to be complete, the natives must be both extinct, and part of a unified history of the nation; the "Indian must fit," or be made to fit, into the "vision of the founding of a nation" (*Fear* 49). Because the Beothuk have been eradicated, while symbolically passing their indigenous heritage on to Croft, Croft can take his place as the next act in a teleological history of Newfoundland.

In Kavanagh's novel, the Beothuk are replaced with the mythical and autosexual creation of a new clan as Tomas Croft stands on a hilltop and scatters his seed "in a pearly steaming mist westward across the field of voluptuous blue" (111). He couples with the feminized and curvaceous land to originate a population that is part Irish, but sprung from the very rock of Newfoundland. As Goldie writes, indigenization is often achieved through "the usual heterosexist metaphor of the nation, in which the female land is met by a male son or lover" ("Man"). Following this scene, Sheila's presence

as almost a surrogate mother to bear his clan seems rather inconsequential; the subsequent generations form “a society born of *his* own loins” (127).

Eli Mandel finds in the myth of origins “the gradual shift from a sense of difference and otherness to a means by which the white culture might fuse with the alien other” (39). Often in colonial contexts, once settlers become a people defined by their relationship to the land, ancestry is seen as derived not from bloodlines, but from geography. Newfoundlanders, then, because of this “sense of place” (Blackmore 348), can claim indigenous ancestry. Robert Kroetsch exhibits this strategic slippage in his discussion of prairie writers:

A local pride leads us to a concern with myths of origin.... For writers like Laurence or Wiebe, there is available to our imaginations a new set of ancestors: the native or Métis people, Big Bear, Riel, the fictional Tonnerre family of *The Diviners*, Dumont. And I would suggest that along with this comes the urban dream that our roots are just over the horizon, in the small towns and the rural communities of the prairies.... The oral tradition, become a literary tradition, points us back to *our own* landscape, *our* recent ancestors, and the characteristic expressions and modes of our own speech.” (7; emphasis added)

The white writer identifies with, or creates, a local myth of origins drawn from Aboriginal culture rather than his or her “ethnic” roots, and in this move appropriates the indigene as ancestor. As the indigene becomes ancestor, the landscape shifts from *theirs* (belonging to the indigenous Other) to “ours,” where the “our” signifies white settler society. Obviously this constitutes a problematic slippage from the violence of colonial occupation to cultural appropriation.

In his contribution to the Newfoundland government’s Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada, writer G.C. Blackmore affects a similar slippage:

The will to survive, to overcome storms (natural, social and economic), the ability to carve out life, to adapt to unfamiliar events and circumstances — all these became the stuff of our spirit. So, too, grew our intimacy with the sea and land, our sense of belonging here, our relationship with those in the place where we lived and where we had our ready identification with others who claimed Newfoundland and Labrador as home. And because, from our earliest days, capitulation to circumstances was never considered a choice, our people could do no other than develop a strong sense of independence and self-reliance, one that became ours as if by birthright.

That connection to our heritage is bred in the bone and, like our link to our history, has been passed on to us, whether we realize it or not, whether we care about it or not. It is part of who we are, part of what might be termed our collective DNA. It may be shaken but it is still there. That spirit of Newfoundland and Labrador is our common line, forged over thousands of years through our First Peoples and engendered over 300 years of European settlement. (369)

“First Peoples” and “European Settlers” become part of the same genealogical line, a line defined by living in what is at times a “penitential” place. This movement from settler to indigene amounts to what Fee calls a white “literary land claim” (17).

The reproductive imagery that connects the female land with patriarchal genealogy appears throughout *Gaff Topsails*. The day in 1948 ends with millions of caplin spawning on the beach, ejaculating “into the sand and the landwash is wet and sticky and luminescent with their seed” (429). The patriarchal lineage continues in the “womb-cove” (139) of the island; land and the indigenized people are united in the natural process of fertilization. This process of renewal and rebirth stands in defiance of the imminent loss of the Newfoundland nation through Confederation. As the priest muses, “all this has happened before, he reckons, perhaps a million times during this eternity” (430). The spawning of the caplin also means their death; there is a sense of lamentable and irrevocable change here. But as Eliade theorizes, through archetypal repetitions “profane time and duration are suspended ... man is projected into the mythical epoch in which the archetypes were first revealed” (35). Through the ritual repetitions of the St. John the Baptist bonfire, the sweetheart’s day rites, even the collecting of the caplin, the villagers abandon the “profane time” in which they live their day-to-day lives and enter the mythical time occupied by the father, Tomas Croft, a time outside of history. There is a sense then that this indigenous Newfoundland essence will continue despite impending change, just as Croft, as the “spirit of the place” (Fowler, “Myth” 80) has lived on in his descendents. Where the monks, the Vikings, and the Beothuk could not survive, this clan lives on.

Indigenous people are mentioned at one other point in “The Kingdom of God,” as the new English coat of arms for the island is described. It “bears lions and unicorns passant, supported by ‘two savages of the clime and apparelled according to their guise when they go to war’ — the existence of which savages is mere rumour” (127). This design is the real coat of arms of Newfoundland, and the quotation within this quotation is from the

proclamation that granted the design in 1637. While it is generally accepted that the Beothuk were reclusive and little known in this period, and that the artist's rendering of the Beothuk is mere conjecture, Kavanagh's addition "the existence of which savages is mere rumour" is a dismissive exaggeration. Many encounters with the Beothuk in this period have been recorded, and while not proven conclusively, it is widely believed that many of the Natives captured as slaves and brought back to Europe in the sixteenth century were Beothuk. (Marshall 3, 16)

To dismiss the Beothuk in this way, even as they are driven from their coastal territory to starve in the interior, is an attempt to justify their absence from the narrative. But a reconfiguration of history into myth can simply repeat the colonial relationship of conquest and domination. To render the Beothuk invisible is also to render their violent extermination invisible. It is no accident that the chapters that describe the creation of the island and the visits of the monks and the Vikings make no mention of any indigenous people, but in fact emphasize the emptiness and "desolation" (91) of the place. *Terra Nova* becomes *Terra Nullius*. As Lawson writes, "empty land can be settled, but occupied land can only be invaded. So the land must be emptied so that it can be filled, in turn, with both discourse and cattle" (25). The reign of the indigenized Irish settler, it seems, is Kavanagh's "Kingdom of God," his idealized teleological development of the island of Newfoundland, a Newfoundland that persists as an "imagined community" despite the threats brought on by Confederation. But by privileging sacred destiny and mythical origin over the reality of colonial conquest, Kavanagh commits one final act of violence against the Beothuk people.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Cartier wrote this famous phrase in his journal upon first seeing the southern coast of Labrador, in the sixteenth century (see Cartier 10). Its (mis)placement here gives Kavanagh's tale the familiarity and resonance of myth.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the racialization of the Irish as “Celtic Calibans” in imperial England, see McClintock 52–53.

<sup>3</sup> It is generally argued that because the Micmac arrived in Newfoundland at approximately the same time as the Europeans, the Beothuk were the island’s only true “aboriginals.”

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