



Ann and Thomas Thoms and their children at Fox Harbour, 1882. (Photo from the D.H. Talbot Collection, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa.)

# Piecing together a past

University researchers have teamed up with communities in southern Labrador to better understand the roots of Inuit-European ancestry

story by Allan Bock

George Santayana probably never set foot in Labrador, but his words could very well describe the motivation behind an ambitious project that's taking place these days. The Spanish-American philosopher is regarded in academic circles for coining the phrase, 'To know your future, you must know your past'.

University researchers have teamed up with community leaders in southeast Labrador in a bid to come up with definitive answers to the questions that have surrounded Inuit occupation in this part of the region. Once they figure out what happened over a period of time that dates back 500 years or so, they will have a better sense of who they are and where they are headed in the future.

"We're no longer thinking were the Inuit even there, or, are there going to be documents that talk about early mixed Inuit-European populations in the archives," says Dr. Lisa Rankin, a Memorial University archeologist. "We know all of that is there, so the emphasis of the study has shifted to what do these things actually mean, and what kinds of stories can we tell about the people who were living in southern Labrador.

"It says to me that no one had really looked for this information before."

Now into the third year of a five-year project, the multi-faceted study is generating a wealth of research. Undoubtedly, that's what the Social Sciences Research Council of Canada was banking on when it funded a comprehensive proposal submitted by university researchers and community partners.

The study, entitled 'Understanding the Past to Build the Future', brings together archeology, ethnography, archival study and genealogy in a geographical area where very little research has been done.

Long before the first cheque was issued under the Community-University Research Alliances program, however, people of Inuit and European ancestry wanted to know about their history and their heritage. With their roots firmly planted in small, once-isolated communities from Lake Melville to Lodge Bay, they identified themselves as Labrador Metis. They have since changed their name to NunatuKavut. It was their conclusion that that cultural legitimacy could only be achieved through academic research.

*continued...*



The views of community leaders found favour with university-based scholars and it was this collaboration that started the ball rolling.

"It was Greg Mitchell of the Labrador Metis Nation who approached me and we decided to apply for a Northern Research Development grant to try and get all of the researchers who were interested in Labrador Inuit studies together to see what the main issues were, what people knew, and what ideas they had about the Inuit in the south," Dr. Rankin notes.

A gathering of Metis representatives, university scholars, government researchers and others took place in Corner Brook in 2006, cementing the idea that joint research was possible. A small group of eight academics from different backgrounds drafted the funding application and, three years later, what was once an idea had legs.

"This kind of multidisciplinary approach is not entirely unique and it should happen more often," says Dr. Rankin, whose role as principal investigator makes her responsible for coordinating the collective effort. "Nobody has approached it in southern Labrador in this way before. To have a group of researchers so diverse, all working together and with one common goal, I think it's unique in the Labrador setting."

It's a view that's shared by Roxanne Notley, a Port Hope



A 17th century Inuit house structure at Snack Cove following excavation. In the foreground is the paved living floor, with upright stones forming lamp stands and storage spaces. Extending into the background is the paved entrance passage. (Photo by Lisa Rankin)

Simpson resident who has been a member of the governing board that monitors the study.

"A lot of times people don't realize what we have is valuable, the history, knowledge, our connection with the land, and our identity with our aboriginal roots," she says. "We didn't

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# history and heritage

need a study to tell us who we are – we innately know that. But for the younger generation, that hasn't been passed on; it's been taken for granted, so we need to capture it because it is being lost. We do need to celebrate who we are and that's what this study has done."

The historical backdrop for the research starts with the Inuit, who reported entered northern Labrador in the late 15th or early 16th centuries and migrated southward. By the 17th century, it is known they were in contact with Europeans who came to Labrador mostly for fishing. The records of missionaries and trading companies documented interactions between primarily Inuit women and European men.

"It's not something the people in southern Labrador didn't know already," says Dr. Rankin. "It was an incredibly dynamic place in the early historic period, with all these people from all parts of the world coming together. There's so much going on there – the sharing of traditions and economies. It's a little capsule of the developing global world. Sometimes I think people Labrador people don't realize that even in the 17th century, they were participating in that global world."

Dr. Rankin has spent the last two years at Huntingdon Island near Cartwright at the mouth of Sandwich Bay, where excavations have gleaned a range of fascinating finds, including several sod-walled houses, boulder tent rings, and artifacts

of both aboriginal and European manufacture. Prior to that, a series of excavations which commenced 10 years ago at near-by Porcupine Strand revealed evidence of several cultural groups over the past 9,000 years.

"We have an Inuit site there that has winter houses that were occupied from the early 17th century through to the late 18th century, so that gives us a full range of what the Inuit were doing over several hundred years in the wintertime," says Dr. Rankin, who is returning to Huntingdon Island this summer.

"Essentially, what it has shown is that every stage that is represented in northern Labrador and central Labrador is also represented in the south; each economic transition that the Inuit went through as they got more and more involved in European economies and global trade is all there too, which is kind of neat because, until recently, people didn't think the Inuit spent much time in Southern Labrador, but we know that they did."

Along with excavations by Dr. Marianne Stopp near Point Amour in the Strait of Belle Isle, there is evidence of Inuit occupation occurring earlier than previously thought.

Equally impressive has been the research painstakingly retrieved and pieced together from church archives, ships' logs, journals, diaries and administrative records. *continued...*

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## history and heritage

Dr. Rankin has a difficult time hiding her enthusiasm and that of her colleagues about the diverse nuggets of information that are helping to shine a light on a developing Metis culture.

"I think we thought when we set out to do this that it would be really difficult and that we were going to run into all kinds of setbacks," she suggests. "We built in various stages for each year about what we hoped to accomplish, thinking that what happens if we don't find the archeological site or what happens if the data is not there in the archives. What we found is that there is a tremendous amount of material; we've had no shortage of things to deal with. I think we're much further ahead with results than we thought we would be by the end of the project."

Those results are coming to the fore in the form of presentations and published works by the so-called group of eight scholars. In addition, there are discussions on a book contract with Memorial University's ISER Books and Dr. Rankin has teamed up with Dr. Mario Blaser to produce a film that doc-

uments the project and tells the story of the Metis culture. The hope is the movie will eventually be picked up by the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. As impressive as that sounds, it still ranks below what Dr. Rankin hopes will be the most important outcome of the study.

"Getting local history into the schools is really, really important in my mind," she says, noting that a new provincial social studies textbook only devoted a scant five or six pages to the Metis. "It would be so much nicer if students in the south could learn about their own families. That detail is available, particularly from the information that genealogist Patricia Way is generating with the family trees and putting it together with some archeological exploration of some of the family homesteads.

"We should be able to take some information into the schools that the students will be able to look at and say, 'That was my great-great-great-great grandfather's place that we're reading about here. My hope is that that level of familiarity with what they're studying

will spark a greater interest in what they're studying."

Academics are occasionally criticized for setting themselves apart from local people, but Ms. Notley says that isn't the case with the CURA research team.

"They made community members who were involved feel that they had more knowledge than the academics did. The community felt that they were the teachers and the researchers were like wet rags – they couldn't get enough."

Research must have a practical purpose, she adds, so hiring youth to work with researchers and encouraging young people to express themselves through video productions is vitally important to ensure the benefits continue long after the study has concluded.

"I would like people to know that this is a real community-oriented project that was initiated by NunatuKavut and university researchers together," says Dr. Rankin. "It was something everyone wanted to do and everyone had a hand in shaping what the goals were. This is something, in my mind, that is by the people, for the people." †

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