Lu Zhang

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School of Education and Environment

Kristianstad University

Supervisor: Eivor Lindstedt

The Lost White Settlers in Michael Crummey’s River Thieves
The Canadian writer Michael Crummey’s first novel, *River Thieves*, is set in the early nineteenth century in Newfoundland. In this novel, the author reveals the unknown European settlers’ shameful colonial story to the world. This essay will explore the personalities and the interpersonal relations of the white settlers in order to highlight the dark consequences of colonization. The notions of truth, regret and guilt which are major themes in this novel will repeatedly be referred to in the discussions.

First, the essay will analyze the following structures: it will look into the white settlers, including the main characters John Senior, Peyton, and Cassie, who are associated with the shame of the land. Then, the relationship between the white settlers and the Beothuk will be addressed. The white settlers’ attitudes towards the Beothuk and the conflict between settlers and the Beothuk will be discussed. Then the dark consequences of colonization – causing the spiritual loss of the white settlers – will be revealed. Thereafter, the supporting passages of the novel will be analyzed, including the tough environment in Newfoundland, the alienation of the settlers in Newfoundland and the guilt of the vanishing of the Beothuk which causes lasting suffering to the white settlers.

Michael Crummey is a winner of the Bronwen Wallace Memorial Award. His *River Thieves* has been a finalist for the Giller Prize, Commonwealth Writers Prize, and the Books in Canada First Novel Award. The author was born in Newfoundland and lives in St. John’s now. He has heard much about the history of his land which has influenced his works. In this sense, the creation of this novel is based on the background of the Indian tribe Beothuk in Newfoundland in the early nineteenth century. As the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* argue, “[h]istories of this kind have […] been important landmarks in the critical history of many of the settler colony literatures” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 133). Like in America and Australia, the history of Canada is the history of its invaders; it is full of conflicts between the white settlers and the native population. Therefore, the settler colonial story constitutes an impressively important part in Canadian literatures. Especially in Canadian history, the Beothuk is “the only
North American Aboriginal group to be entirely extinguished during the colonial period” (Wyile 230). Crummey’s intention is to convey a sense of truth, regret and guilt which the crisis of colonization brings.

Although Crummey emphasizes that *River Thieves* is “a work of imagination” (Crummey 333), the Beothuk vanished when the last known Beothuk died in St. John’s in 1829. The extinction of the Beothuk is due to various reasons. The arrival of European settlers is definitely one of the important factors contributing to the extinction of the Beothuk. The white settlers’ years of relentless killing really forced the Beothuk to retreat inland, where there was less sea food to live on. Crummey adds a note on the Beothuk in his book *River Thieves*:

> With the spread of British and French communities throughout the island’s coastline, the Beothuk lost access to much of their traditional territory. A combination of violence, exposure to diseases such as tuberculosis, and loss of coastal resources essential to their survival, decimated the Indian population. (Crummey 335)

The coming of European settlers brings the conflicts between the original society and the modern society. The settlers break the traditional ways in which the Beothuk are living and force them to accept the modern way of living which ought not to belong to them. When Reilly’s wife Annie was young, she and her parents met a family of Beothuk Indians who were suffering from severe hunger. They refused to use weapons to kill animals (269). The lack of food is becoming a problem to the Beothuk who are always living on sea food after they have retreated inland. The boundaries between their languages and the misunderstandings these language barriers create give rise to violence and hostility between the white settlers and the Beothuk. The tragic consequences are inevitable. Finally, illness, the lack of food and the interaction with European people made the Beothuk decline until they eventually disappeared.

The ambiguous title of the book, *River Thieves*, may make the reader think that the novel is about the Beothuk. Generally speaking, the title can be interpreted as referring
to both the Red Indians, that is, the Beothuk, and the white settlers. From the white settlers’ perspective, river thieves can refer to the Red Indians. They are shameless thieves in the whites’ eyes. However, from the perspective of the native population, it is the white settlers who steal the land from the Red Indians. They are responsible for the vanishing of the Beothuk. However, the whole novel follows the settlers’ expedition in search of Red Indians; the author mainly describes the individual settlers more than the Beothuk Indians. Just as Crummey suggests in an interview, he wants “the part of the novel that is basically a little ‘soap opera’ between the European characters to throw some light on the historical drama that is the spine of the book” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). Therefore, the theory used to analyze the novel is Post-colonial criticism, combined with New Critical close reading. From a post-colonial point of view, *The Empire Writes Back* claims that there are “three major issues” at play in texts dealing with settlements in the new world, namely:

the relationship between social and literary practices in the old world and the new; the relationship between the indigenous populations in settled areas and the invading settlers; and the relationship between the imported language and the new place. (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 135)

Accordingly, Crummey’s *River Thieves* is a typical post-colonial work since it inevitably includes a discussion of the relationship between the native population in settled areas and the settlers. The essay will use quotations from the novel to provide an understanding in the readers of the problems it presents.

The novel has many flashbacks occurring in the narratorial parts of the story, in the characters’ thoughts and in the conversations. They reveal the complex relationships between the characters and their bitter experiences. On one hand, Crummey attempts to talk about the Beothuk from the perspective of “the white people who survived knew about them” (Wyile & Crummey 300). He points out “[t]hat’s what extinction means” (300). In that case, “In between are a series of embedded tales within tales detailing tangled character motivations, confessions, and personal histories, including the
mystery of the relationship between Peyton Sr. and Cassie” (Sugars 166). On the other hand, the island is full of unseen shames. “Too often in literature about Newfoundland, the characters are described as somehow being mystically of the land” (Chafe 97). There is no exception to the Newfoundlander Crummey purposely chooses in *River Thieves*. The shame is connected with every character; almost everyone has their unrevealed secret; almost everyone has witnessed the killing or the capture of the Beothuk.

At the beginning of the story, John Senior appeals to us because of his horrible shouts in his nightmares. His nightmares are partly due to his bad memory with his father’s violent punishment. His father brought him to a public hanging and beat him savagely after returning home. This treatment had bad effects on John. Once he fell ill and felt a “blind rage”, wanting to “beat his father senseless” (Crummey 72). His past has shaped the way he interacts with the world and others. He never talks about his feeling but keeps silent, just like he takes revenge for the thievery of his cherished watch his father left him. However, when Mary is dying, he gives the watch to her (312). He hates the Beothuk but he is also ashamed of the savage actions of Harry Miller towards them.

John Senior is a failure as a father and a husband. The relationship between his wife and himself is tense. He brings his son to Newfoundland ignoring his wife’s objection. His wife moves into another room to protest against his affairs with prostitutes when his son was thirteen years old. He does not defend himself or show that he cares about his wife’s reaction. He pretends to be cool and hides his deeper concerns inside. He is sharply strict with his son; however, he protects him whenever he is in danger. John Senior’s personality is shaped by his father’s mistreatment of him. Nevertheless, he is like his father; in the same way, his son is like him. There are at least two divergent opinions affecting the father and the son. As to the attitude toward the Beothuk, John Senior wants revenge for his stolen belongings. His son, on the contrary, wants to resolve the conflicts peacefully and in a more friendly way.
John Senior’s feelings towards Cassie are unclear. His son is convinced that his father is Cassie’s lover, especially after his first period of absence from home. Her presence in the Peyton household triggers off the causes of crisis in the father-son relationship. John Senior brings Cassie to his family as his son’s tutor, expecting her to be his son’s wife. Actually, the most important reason is that he wants to rescue Cassie from her drunken father after the death of her mother. A perplexing question lies inside him and returns again and again; his wife or his daughter? “His uncertainty made him turn away from her and he never afterwards took it further than lying awake nights, having her in his mind” (265). His feelings of attraction towards Cassie contradict his purposes to match his son and her. John Senior’s inner extremely gloomy personality is revealed.

Cassie Jure is an intelligent and distinguished woman character. She has her own secrets which are finally exposed at the end of the novel. The plot does not develop as a love triangle, as the readers might have expected. Cassie’s secret lover is not John Senior but the navy man Buchan. After her abortion in Annie’s house, she purposely lets Peyton believe that the lost child’s father is John Senior. Once Peyton discovers the truth in the journal, he understands his suspicions about Cassie and his father have been wrong: “Peyton lifted a hand to his forehead. His first thought was that Cassie had cheated on his father somehow” (292). Cassie knows that there are some things that she cannot choose for herself in her life, like her lover and her childhood. She looks forward to getting a life that fulfils her expectations; she will continue “fighting to keep herself free and clear” (316). In the end she fails. She chooses the man she will not get. The life she finally chooses is to escape from the house of the killers of the Beothuk and go to search for the Red Indians’ trace to atone for the white man’s sin against them. She loves Buchan, apparently because he is willing to listen to what she feels and ask about her opinions. She feels to be respected and to be a woman. In the same way, they both have bitter experiences from their childhood. Cassie’s limped leg is connected to her shameful secret which she does not reveal to anybody. Her mother pushed her down the
stairs when she discovered the affair between her husband and her daughter. She has her memories about her mother and she never wants to return to St. John’s to see her father. Like Buchan, she has regrets for her dead mother. Cassie chooses Buchan; even so, she never thinks of being together with Buchan. As Buchan claims that she is one of his other women, Cassie is likely to have known it (322). She defines her role in Buchan’s life and keeps her dignity as a woman not being looked upon by Buchan. Cassie is Crummey’s favorite character. He holds that “[s]omeone with a wit and an incandescent intelligence, with personal resources and strengths I don’t have at my disposal” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). Cassie is very wise. She has her wisdom from literature. She seems to know everything before it happens. The secrets have made her a strong character rather than a dotted one.

In *River Thieves*, the character John Peyton is an important protagonist. The descriptions of many characters are mostly from Peyton’s point of view. Meanwhile, this novel reconstructs Peyton’s growth. Several expeditions and the environment of Newfoundland have tempered him to be a tough man. He feels fearful when facing his powerful mother: “He didn’t know what to call this tendency of his but cowardice” (Crummey 67). Leaving England for Newfoundland is a good beginning to change a boy into a man. On the expedition when they capture Mary, Peyton seems to replace the position of John Senior in the group. As to the way to deal with the Beothuk, Peyton does not capitulate and has a dispute with his father at that expedition. (164 & 192) All these events demonstrate Peyton’s change. The triangular relationship is one of the highlights of the whole novel. Peyton tries to capture Cassie’s attention, but he is not really interested in literature. When he returns home after a few months’ absence, he imagines that Cassie and his father have a secret affair. He is very frustrated and annoyed that they get on with each other like nothing has happened. He suffers his own quiet imagination and suspicion. At last, he loses Cassie leaving her disappearing in the forest. Although Peyton is annoyed with his father because of Cassie, he lies in court at St. John’s to defend him (200-202). Peyton has emotions when he sees his father---the
old man is working hard. “‘My father’, Peyton thought. But he couldn’t make himself feel it” (165). Actually, Peyton is like his father, as mentioned above. For example, his father and he are both inexperienced to cope with women. For this reason, they behave in the same way when they are with Cassie and the wife/mother. From the first time Peyton saw a Red Indian girl in England, when he paid two pence stolen from his father, he is obsessed with the fate of the Beothuk. Later, in Newfoundland, his father takes him to an Indian grave and gives him a bag as a keepsack. He witnesses the capture and the death of the last Beothuk Mary. He lies about the two Indians’ death for his father’s sake or for the white’s sake instead. John Peyton’s words at the end of the novel are significant: “All my life I’ve loved what didn’t belong to me” (327).

As to the other characters’ failings, Reilly was once a thief to be deported to the settlement. He has a shameful branding on his hand. Richmond takes captive the Indian girl who is displayed to entertain the curiosity of the English audience as Peyton has seen. As is hinted at in the text, Richmond killed the girl’s family just to catch the girl (306). Buchan makes a compromise in the investigation of the murder on the lake. The price is too high to prove Reilly’s innocence and mercy. The best way to justice is to hide the truth. In this case, truth cannot be arrived at through a choice between true and false. Moreover, during the first expedition Buchan leads, the Indians kill two white men because they recognize someone who may do harm to them. Crummey claims in Wyile’s interview: “I think the book asks readers to make judgments. But at the same time I don’t think that any of those can be simple or one-dimensional.” (Wyile & Crummey 315) The readers are led to wonder as to how much truth is hidden behind the extinction of the Beothuk? Is there anything the novel has not revealed? Has the true story ever been told, or is the truth to be found in Crummey’s story? The author leaves the questions to the readers. To maintain their interests, the settlers are driven to make use of lies. The truth people can use their eyes to see is false somehow. For example, Richmond reveals things to Buchan about a man, Young, and he tells Young that it is Reilly who shot the Red Indian (Crummey 284). Actually, Richmond looks down upon
Reilly not only because he is Irish but also since he marries an Indian Mi’kmaq woman. Buchan learns the truth from Young. (283) Hence, there is a doubt whether Richmond purposely reveals Young to Buchan or not. If it is true, the truth is not what it seems on the surface. It cannot be excluded that Richmond wants to take Reilly to death. Richmond remembers the process of the captivity of the Indian girl, but his memories are contradicted by the true story. In the novel, the truth is always reluctantly revealed in others’ view. It confuses readers as to what is true. However, the investigation of any clues in the text to explore the white settlers’ secrets does not seem to be as important to Buchan as the vanishing of the Indian tribe. As Buchan said to Peyton, “[w]e have taken the tragedy of an entire race of people, Mr. Peyton, and cheapened it with our own sordid little melodrama” (305).

In *River Thieves*, the three relationships are the three conflicts respectively: the conflict between the new world and the old; the conflict between the Beothuk and the white; the conflict between the language and the place. In the post-colonial context, there is one important element that cannot be ignored. That is the relationship between the white settlers and the native population. In *River Thieves*, the white settlers’ expeditions seem to communicate with the Beothuk and to show friendship with them. Actually, these expeditions are at the mercy of the white settlers themselves. One of Buchan’s tasks is to draw the shoreline to explore the new land that formerly belonged to the Beothuk. In addition, the expeditions are carried on to avoid bloodshed between the Beothuk and the white. However, the outcome of the first expedition really disappoints the governor Duckworth who supports and starts the expedition (19 & 112-114). It intensifies the existing contradictions. The relationship between the Beothuk and the white settlers is really irreconcilable. The long-standing suffering the white people bring has already broken their connections so that they do not believe in each other. Mary, like the girl displayed at Poole, dies of an imported European disease, which reflects the contradictions between the new world and the old one.

The white settlers’ attitudes towards the Beothuk are different. Governor
Duckworth learns about the history of the Beothuk; meanwhile, he is aware of the conditions of the Red Indians and the danger of revenge. He tries his best to pass a law to protect the Red Indians and make a contact with them. These official recommendations are ignored with Duckworth retiring from his position:

In the eyes of the British Crown at the time, the island of Newfoundland wasn’t considered a proper colony, but a sort of floating fishing station and training ground for naval recruits, a country that existed only during the summer months. (185)

The government does not cherish the land and the native people there. The governor is said to escape from the debt from England. Duckworth’s devoting work on the protection of the Beothuk has not caused much attention from the Privy Council, who is “unwilling to risk alienating the growing population of settlers by appearing to side with local natives” (17). The authorities from the old world just do the things which are beneficial to them. They care about their fishery rather than the extinction of the Beothuk. John Senior cannot get the compensation the government promises; he decides to take action by himself. They do not let Mary’s husband take her because they want to get the reward from the government. In order to get hold of that poor Indian girl, Richmond kills the girl’s family and brings the girl to the governor to get the prize. The promises the government has made change with the retirement of the governor.

Buchan and Peyton are of the same kind. They are supposed to be the heroes of the novel. They show sympathy with the Indians. When they walk on the land of the Indians, they show guilt and worry. Buchan supports the law and makes an effort to investigate into the death of the two Indians. Peyton tries to stop any violence of his father’s group to the Indians. Buchan’s and Peyton’s attempts fail and the men behave contrary to what had been agreed upon; they use violence against the Red Indians. Buchan returns to St. John’s to state that Peyton’s party is justified. Peyton asks their men to shoot the Red Indian to protect his father. John Senior disapproves of Buchan’s and Peyton’s attitude towards the Indians. John Senior is absolutely the killers of the Indians while Buchan
and Peyton try their best to stop the inhuman attacks against the Indians by white settlers.

Harry Miller once describes the Indians’ land as a “whore” (256). He kills the Indians relentlessly to take revenge on them or to tame the land. The settlers are annoyed by the Indians’ thievery, and they have much Indian blood on their hands. Miller’s death agitates the conflict. John Senior and Richmond witness the killing of Harry Miller by the Beothuk. The settlers are suffering for their sins. Therefore, they are related with the fate of the Beothuk.

Only Cassie knows who the Indians are. She thinks that they are just “lost” children “as if they don’t recognize the country they live in any more” (223). She is willing to listen to Mary. She teaches her to read; she teaches her their manners; Cassie protects Mary whenever she is in trouble. She also learns some Beothuk words and the rough sketch of the Bay of Exploits which Mary has drawn. (316) Apparently, Cassie is the one who tries to establish their indigeneity. In the beginning of the novel, she quotes from *The Rape of Lucrece*, saying: “O unseen shame, invisible disgrace!” (6) to explain John Senior’s ‘old hag’. Finally, she disappears from the Peyton household, possibly to follow the Indian track. Cassie’s fate is “a kind of mirror image of what the Beothuk were experiencing” (Wyile & Crummey 303). Apparently, Cassie is the one who assimilates most into the new area. She is able to see things from the Red Indians’ perspective, as is revealed in her early conversations with Buchan (Crummey 223).

The three parts of the novel begin with excerpts from the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*. “If words achieve some kind of Real presence in this novel, the alignment of the Beothuk words with settler-invader national origins is effected more directly in the interweaving of citations of Newfoundland vocabulary throughout the novel.” (Sugars 169) In the novel, the language becomes a barrier between the white and the Beothuk. They use gestures and signals to contact each other but it can easily cause some misunderstandings. If Peyton had not waved the handkerchief, Mary’s husband and brother would not have come down to the shore. The killing might have
been avoided. They capture Mary and then teach her English words. They try to make her an interpreter between themselves and the Beothuk. Mary teaches Cassie some Beothuk words. It is important to be equal to each other to establish a friendship. The whites want to immerse their language into Mary and force her to speak it. This makes Mary absolutely voiceless. (Crummey 204) Furthermore, more native people use the language of the settlers. Apart from the Mi’kmaq and Beothuk languages, Reilly’s wife Annie, a Mi’kmaq Indian, can speak English. The Mi’kmaq Noel Young speaks French. In Canada, the native languages do not gain the upper hand. The fact is, Canada, as a settlement, does not have its own language. The English the immigrants use still connects them to their European mother country. Nevertheless, in the process of assimilating into the new world and getting rid of the old world, they kill the native people and cause the extinction of the native tongue. The Beothuk terms at the beginning of every part demonstrate the colonial history of Newfoundland and the white settlers’ sin. River Thieves shows the importance of language.

The sin of colonization cannot be forgiven. The story mixes with the history about England’s competition with France for a share of overseas colonies. Canada has been the colony of the French. The native tribe Mi’kmaq was in peace with the Beothuk until the French posted the bounty for the killing of the Beothuk. The Beothuk not only tried to escape being killed by the European settlers, but they also met the threats from the Mi’kmaq. In River Thieves, the Mi’kmaq Indian Noel Young has killed ninety-nine Red Indians. Apparently, it is the French who are responsible for the enmity between the two native peoples. Thus, the white settlers play an important role in the extinction of the Beothuk. The Beothuk’s suffering can be imagined. The hard life makes them gradually disappearing from the earth. Sugars claims in her essay Original Sin:

The extermination of the Beothuk is the national holocaust. It is shameful, and horrifying, but, nevertheless, it is definitive. We use it to reflect on our inheritance---of imperial barbarity, of invader-settler disquiet. It is the limit where the myth of Canadian civility crumbles. (Sugars 163)
As a result, the loss of the Beothuk means the loss of the original world. In the same way, the intrusion of the newcomers destroys the peaceful relations between the Beothuk and the Mi’kmaq.

During the absence of the Beothuk in the text, the novel mainly talks about the white settlers. Crummey is obviously concerned with his characters:

The European characters in the novel, the settlers, are completely unable to communicate with one another, even when they have the best of intentions. [...] In the end, River Thieves is a book about regret. For the individual characters, it's usually regret of a personal nature. For me, and hopefully for a reader, it goes somewhere beyond that, encompasses something larger. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

The novel highlights the weakness in the personalities of the white settlers and the complicated interpersonal relations. “At the end of the novel, both natives and settlers are lost in a landscape they no longer recognize. One group of symbolic ancestors has been displaced by another” (Sugars 172). The tragedy of the Beothuk is the history of the European settlement. The remaining Beothuk retreat inland to escape from being killed by white settlers. The severe weather and the shortage of food mark the extinction of the group. “The Beothuk of River Thieves function more as an absence than a presence and are thus inseparable from the notion of loss that has become a fundamental part of Newfoundland’s culture” (Chafe 96). The loss of the Beothuk offers an insight into the spiritual loss of the white settlers. These facts, including the tough environment in Newfoundland, all contribute to the alienation and the guilt of the white settlers.

People in Newfoundland are suffering from the cold weather, the hard work and the unexpected fire at St. John’s. “The price paid for the continued existence of Newfoundland has been too high and has involved the relinquishing of independence and the erasure of an entire people” (96). Readers may be impressed by the death of the first governor of Newfoundland in the office: “The severe conditions of the winter, the turmoil in the aftermath of the fires, the constant damp and cold of the governor’s
residence overtook him like a predator running down a wounded animal” (Crummey 141). The governor cannot adapt to the hard life in the settlement; consequently, he dies there. The conditions of the poor people are worse than the governor’s. They make a living by fishing. They work hard outside years after years. They build their houses on their own. The two fires of 1817 almost ruin everyone’s hope of life. Everyone has to bear their suffering and struggle for their bread. The government of England does not offer any help to them. “Dozens of desperate men were arrested for stealing, for muggings, for disorderly conduct” (240). They deal with the harsh reality of their existence on the island. St. John’s after the fire is an awful mess. People get into a real panic and pay the price for establishing their place in the new land. Likewise, the women’s miscarriages are the product of the tough environment. The poor medical conditions and the uncomfortable homes make the women the victims. Annie’s mother was often called to the settlers’ families when there was no doctor around before the turn of the century. Richmond’s wife Siobhan miscarriages so that she cannot become pregnant anymore. Buchan’s wife Marie is almost killed when giving birth to their child. Cassie deliberately loses her baby in Annie’s tilt. The loss and sufferings have accompanied the European settlers with their settlement and exploration in the Beothuk’s land.

The alienation felt by the European settlers in Newfoundland demonstrates the fact that the psychological changes grown out of the land have affected their personalities and life. The white in settler colonies are often regarded as invading settlers, or even as colonists who often show an unpleasant identity in the new land. They do not separate completely from their European centre; however, they gradually become marginalized in relation to the old world. Furthermore, they cannot identify with the culture of the native population. As a result, the white settlers in the settlements feel unfamiliarity and emptiness. They do not fully adapt themselves to life in the settlements. All these factors have constituted their particular identity. What is left for them is the suffering of living in a settlement far away from home. Richmond’s and Taylor’s families move to London
when they are released from the French vessel. The changes of England imbue them with the sense of there being a nagging fight against them. Richmond’s mother likes singing the old Welsh songs, but after the winter in England she becomes voiceless. She does not sing the songs any longer not even when they return to Newfoundland that spring: “[T]hose songs came to occupy a hollow place in Richmond’s life, faceless and nameless and lost as they were” (254). As to Cassie’s parents, after their moving to Newfoundland, her mother cannot bear her drunken husband’s gradually dissolute manners (144-145). The sadness of a not fully satisfying marriage also happens to the couple of Buchan and Marie. It is difficult to say that Buchan does not love his wife; nevertheless, there are some problems in their marriage. Buchan is uncertain how his wife will react if she gets to know what he actually is. In addition, the definitions of home are various: Buchan is from Scotland, his wife is French. Reilly is from Ireland and John Senior from England, and Richmond’s mother is from Wales. Their various geographical displacements, result in their having no longer any definite place they can refer to as “home”. This condition creates a sense of homelessness in the settlers. They are always far away from their home.

The themes of regret and guilt run through the novel. The Beothuk of this novel “have become the focus of both Canadian postcolonial guilt (over past atrocities) and postcolonial desire (for origins/authenticity)” (Sugars 152). John Senior’s nightmare appears more frequently as he grows older. He cannot prevent the frequent occurrence of this nightmare. It is sense of guilt, which is reflected in his nightmares, and it grows even “darker” and “deeper” and more “sinister”, like “a cloth dyed with the colours of fifty years” (256). He disagrees with Miller’s ways to deal with Indians. He does not know that he will be one conspirator in killing Indians. His onshore life is a struggle against the Red Indians. When Mary is dying, he gives the remaining of his father’s watch to Peyton to return it to Mary which motivates Peyton to join the expedition. This is the first time Senior is shown to make a friendly gesture toward the Beothuk. Is it an act of repentance? The suffering of the persisting guilt has not been decaying so easily.
He will affect his son to some extent. In many ways, Peyton’s anxiety functions as a correlative for contemporary settler postcolonial guilt. His lying about the happenings at the lake will plague him throughout his life. To Mary’s death, “[f]or the first time it seemed true to him [Peyton] that what happened to this woman touched something larger than his life, the fate of the few people he cared for” (314). The grief and the regret become a burden on Peyton from his first glimpse of that Indian girl displayed at Poole. In River Thieves, the Beothuk tragedy functions as a reminder of the European settlers’ innate conflicts. It establishes the Canadian settler identity in the settlers’ culture Canada has rooted.

As stated in River Thieves, “[a] story is never told for its own sake” (289). The story’s primary interest is not in the lost Beothuk, but in the settlers who are condemned to mourn both the loss of the Beothuk Indians and the white settlers. In the early 1800s in Newfoundland, isolation, displacement, racism and violence interweave the fate of the Beothuk with the white settlers. Crummey’s novel dwells above all on the European settlers in Newfoundland. There are no weak characters here. “Crummey offers his readers a long look into Newfoundland’s ‘heart of darkness’ […]” (Chafe 93). There are at least three themes in the novel: truth, regret and guilt. History owes the Beothuk an apology. The vanishing of the Beothuk reflects the loss of the white settlers. The tough environment makes the settlers’ history reappear. Their alienation in Newfoundland separates them from their mother country. They are destined to fight in a world of conflicts. The guilt of the vanishing of the Beothuk will bring them a lasting suffering.
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