



The traditional Inuit way of life had a strong and well developed oral tradition. The myths, tales and songs that Inuit elders told or sang in Inuktitut, Inuttitut or Inuttut at family and community gatherings, ensured that traditional beliefs, symbols and values were transmitted from one generation to the next. This extensive oral literature did not have any written equivalent until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Moravians are a Protestant community claiming apostolic origins who developed in Moravia, now part of the Czech Republic, in the later 17<sup>th</sup> century. Under Count Zinzendorf, they established a thriving community in Herrnhut, Germany which became a centre of worldwide Christian outreach for the church. Moravians appeared in England in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and had great influence on John Wesley and the Methodist movement. Moravians (Unitas Fratrum) arrived in Labrador from Greenland in 1721 and by 1771 had begun to establish permanent settlements along the coast.

This exhibition traces the beginnings of literacy and literature for the Inuit living in Labrador and, to a lesser extent, in the Canadian eastern Arctic. The Moravian missionaries transcribed biblical texts into a written form of Inuktitut and were the first in Canada to write and publish Inuktitut using Latin characters. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, an Anglican missionary in Northern Quebec (now Nunavik) transcribed parts of these same Moravian biblical translations into syllabic orthography. These Church Missionary Society publications were used across the eastern Arctic in mission churches and in Inuit homes.

Inuit living in Labrador in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were more literate than white settlers as a direct result of the Moravian missionaries who taught them to read and write in Inuktitut in the mission schools. Many of the original Inuktitut (Roman orthography) texts used by the mission teachers and students are part of this exhibition. The writings of Moravian missionaries and other Labrador travelers provide many archival sources documenting the reading habits of the Inuit. Labrador Inuit were also exceptionally musical and choirs and instrumental bands were a fixture in the Moravian churches.

The Labrador Inuit are the first Canadian Inuit to have written in their own language. Their first texts took the form of diaries, poetry, songs or personal narratives. Contemporary Inuit writing is now often in English. Since the late 1960s, there has been a proliferation of bilingual and trilingual magazines, newsletters and newspapers. These periodicals have provided a forum for Canadian Inuit writings about the present and have preserved the “as-told-to” elders’ stories.



Courtesy of Unity Archives, Herrnhut, Saxony, Germany. Moravian Archives Herrnhut, LBS 1957

Items displayed in this exhibition have been selected from McGill’s Rare Books & Special Collections including The Lawrence Lande Collection of Canadiana, The Lande Eskimo Collection and The Lande Arkin Collection supplemented by the collections of McGill’s Humanities & Social Sciences Library and McGill’s Education Library.

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