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Introduction to Micmac Hieroglyphics By John Hewson The Micmac people may well be considered among the most remarkable of the Amerindian tribes of the Atlantic seaboard, that is, of those native peoples who were the first to meet the Europeans arriving in the New World. Not only did the Micmac survive the coming of the Europeans, but they are the only, tribe which, after European contact, actually expanded territorially: they came to occupy extensive hunting territories in Newfoundland in early historical times. To have survived was remarkable enough. The American Indians had no immunity against the white man's diseases, and died like flies of such scourges as smallpox and tuberculosis. And the superior technology of the Europeans, who had discovered the use of gunpowder in the thirteenth century, was not only damaging to the Indians when hostilities broke out, but a source of continual pressure to the Indian to assimilate. Assimilation, whereby a people give up their distinctive ways, their language, legends, art and mode of life to become part of another culture, means the death of their own culture, the end of their survival as a people. The name Micmac is a plural (mi'kma'q "the allies") of which the singular is mi'kma'w. literally "one's ally." They were the allies of the French from the founding of Port Royal in 1604. The chief of the Port Royal Band, Membertou, became the first Indian to be baptized as a Christian on this continent, in 1610. Others followed, and the Micmac became Christianized as the Europeans themselves had done a thousand years before. (We sometimes forget that Christianity is not, in origin, a European religion.) Membertou, by contemporary accounts, was a most extraordinary man. He was said to remember the arrival of Jacques Cartier in 1534 and was thought to be well over 100 years old at his death. He won the respect and admiration of the Europeans and required the French sea captains to fire a 21-gun salute in his honour when they entered Port Royal harbour (the same honour that would be bestowed on a reigning sovereign in Europe). A great man himself, he showed his people how to treat the Europeans: how to learn from them, and be their ally and friend, without losing sight of one's own identity or being afraid to be oneself. Another feature that sets the Micmac apart was the development of a writing system-- the Micmac hieroglyphics. This is not a story like that of the lonely Cherokee genius Sequoyah who analysed the European writing system from a book he had found in the grass, and having discovered, by the brilliance of his intellect alone, the secret of the white man's "talking leaves," developed an alphabet, or rather syllabary, for his people, making them literate within a decade. Rather it is a story of collaboration, whereby a European missionary developed and systematized a native Indian trick of making marks on birch bark as an aide-memoire (aid to memory). Consequently the shapes of many of the hieroglyphics are pure Algonkian, adapted from the typical double-scroll patterns that the Algonkians used for decorative motifs on clothes, mocassins, and other items. Typical examples of such double scroll work, for example, may be seen in the decorations on Micmac ceremonial dress coats and hats, on the hunting coats and



tobacco pouches of the Montagnais from the Quebec North Shore, and even on the caribou skin coat, attributed to the Beothuk girl Shanawdithit, which is now in the Newfoundland Museum. (Note: this motif is prevalent among the Micmac petroglyphs--writing on stone--found in Nova Scotia.) According to John Shea ("Micmac or Recollected Hieroglyphs," 1861), it was the Jesuit Father Gabriel Druilletes, founder of the Kennebec mission in 1646, who first noticed how the Indians made notes: Some wrote their lessons after their fashion; they used a small coal as a pen, and a bark for a paper. Their characters are so novel and peculiar, that one would not know or understand the writing of another; that is to say, they use certain marks, according to their ideas, as a local memory, to recollect the points, articles, and maxims which they had heard. They took their papers with them to study their lessons during the night. (The 'H' The double-curve motif as seen in petroglyphs from Keiimkuiik Lake, N. S., and in beadwork on a woman's peaked cap, circa 1770-1790. See photo next page.