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An Introduction to Charles A. Cooke within the Context of Aboriginal Identity

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See table of contents

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by Timothy C. Winegard

> *"We need not waste any time in sympathy for the Indian, for I am pretty sure his interests will be looked after...The Indian is a ward of the Government still. The presumption of the law is that he has not the capacity to decide what is for his ultimate benefit in the same degree as his guardian, the Government of Canada."* [1]
>
> -Arthur Meighen, Minister of the Interior and Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs, 23 April 1918.

Duncan Campbell Scott, through his influential position as Deputy Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932, was the pivotal catalyst in promulgating paternalistic and assimilationist policies:

> I want to get rid of the Indian problem...Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department.[2]

Following official sanction in December 1915, Scott viewed the military service of Aboriginal men during "The Great War for Civilization" as assimilation by other means:

> These men who have been broadened by contact with the outside world and its affairs, who have mingled with the men of other races, and who have witnessed the many wonders and advantages of civilization, will not be content to return to their old Indian mode of life...thus the war will have hastened that day, the millennium of those en-gaged [sic] in Indian work, when all the quaint old customs, the weird and picaresque ceremonies, the sun dance and the potlatch and even the musical and poetic native languages shall be as obsolete as the buffalo and the tomahawk, and the last tepee of the Northern wilds give place to a model farmhouse.[3]

What has been largely neglected in the historiography of Native-Newcomer relations, and the sub-genre of Aborigi-

[1] E. Brian Titley, *A Narrow Vision: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Administration of Indian Affairs in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1986), 41; Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992), 202.

[2] Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG10, Vol. 6810, File 470-2-3. Memorandum: Duncan Campbell Scott, Residential Schools and the Indian Question, 1920.

[3] Duncan Campbell Scott, *Report of the Deputy Superintendent General: The Indians and the Great War* (Ottawa: Indian Affairs, 1919), 13.

nal participation in the First World War, are the strategies initiated by Indigenous peoples to promote their agendas and confront the paternalistic edicts of the Indian Act and the control of the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA); they were not spectators to the ongoing process of colonization and the convergence of cultures. J.R. Miller and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, acknowledge that Aboriginal peoples

> were active agents who adopted strategies of 'resistance, evasion and defiance to counter attempts to control their lives and eradicate their traditions,' and that Indian Affairs bureaucrats recognized the weakness of their position and were reluctant to provoke confrontation.[4]

Mohawk-Ojibwa, Charles A. Cooke, serves as an exemplary case study within this paradigm. His conduct as a clerk at the DIA and as an honorary Lieutenant recruiting Aboriginal men in Ontario and Quebec during the First World War, highlight his desire and ability to advance First Nations interests from "inside" white society and political arenas. Natives like Cooke acted as "bridge people" between their cultures and repressive governmental systems. Linda Tuhiwai Smith asserts that, "Their elite status came about through the alignment of their cultural and economic interests with the colonizing group rather than with those of their own society."[5] This interpretation, however, removes the dynamic and conscious participation of Indigenous peoples within the colonial experience. Many believed that excelling, and showing themselves as capable as Euro-Canadians, in so-called European civilized pursuits, was a means to prove their worth as Aboriginal people both individually and collectively—in other words, selective assimilation for the aims of equality and autonomy. This is not to say, however, that these Aboriginal Canadians viewed themselves as assimilated, nor did it mean that they had rejected their Aboriginal culture. While certain commentators have criticized these people for abandoning or becoming estranged from their traditional roots, given contemporary racial attitudes, and socio-economic and political realities, this is unwarranted. The majority believed that by entering and engaging in Canadian society as Aboriginals, they could participate on equal terms and win the respect of the dominant Euro-Canadian society in order to gain rights for their own peoples. Accordingly, Cooke viewed the First World War as an extension of this approach.

In effect, just as the war stimulated, and was used to promote, nationalist attitudes and demands in Canada in relation to the Imperial government, the same can be said for First Nations in relation to Canada. As a microcosm, In-

[4] P. Whitney Lackenbauer, *Battle Grounds: The Canadian Military and Aboriginal Lands* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 81; J.R. Miller, "Owen Glendower, Hotspur, and Canadian Indian Policy," *Ethnohistory* 37:4 (1990), 386-391.

[5] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "Colonizing Knowledges," in *The Indigenous Experience: Global Perspectives*, edited by Roger C.A. Maaka and Chris Andersen (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2006), 97.

digenous Canadians sought the same recognition from Canada (and to a certain extent the Crown), as Canada sought from the mother country—equality and autonomy. For both parties, significant participation in the war represented one avenue to achieve these ambitions. In this sense, the patriotic reactions of many Indigenous leaders in 1914, and their subsequent actions throughout the war, were no different from those of Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden and Canadian politicians.

However, Indigenous Canadians did not represent a monolithic, homogenous entity; rather, they were a diverse collective of nations with distinct cultures, histories and experiences. This point is exemplified by the differing responses of various First Nations communities in Ontario towards Cooke's recruitment drive to enlist Aboriginal men. In a dichotomy of perceived representation, some viewed him as an Aboriginal who could promote their welfare and grievances within the DIA, while others scrutinized him as an assimilated appendage to the oppressive Canadian administration. Both estimations, however, are indicative of a choice to promote or protect community-specific interests.

I am pleased to introduce the following two complementary articles on Charles A. Cooke, as important, and well-researched, additions to the scant historiography of influential Ontario Aboriginals. The first, "Charles A. Cooke (Thawennensere): Mohawk Scholar, Civil Servant, Amateur Anthropologist, Performer and Writer," by Brendan F.R. Edwards, places Cooke within the broader spheres of Native-Newcomer relations in both Canada and Ontario, while exploring the various devices Cooke employed to foster Aboriginal culture and objectives. The second, Katharine McGowan's "'In the interest of the Indians': The Department of Indian Affairs, Charles Cooke and the Recruitment of Native Men in Southern Ontario for the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1916," adds to the sparse body of literature detailing regional actions and reactions of First Nations peoples across Ontario to recruitment and participation during the First World War. It also exemplifies the capricious governmental policies regarding the military inclusion of Aboriginal Canadians. Both investigations, using Cooke as the medium, illustrate that Indigenous peoples were active participants in the colonial process and implemented strategies to safeguard and promote their interests and traditions; thus, they are worthy additions to the catalogue of *Ontario History*.