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## The Indian Background of Canadian History

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## THE INDIAN BACKGROUND OF CANADIAN HISTORY

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EVER SINCE the day Christopher Columbus landed on the shores of San Salvador, the Indian has been one of the principal actors upon the stage of American history. To-day his role, in Canada at least, may be limited to a walking-on part; but he has never been dropped from the cast. The Indian is not a vanishing but a permanent factor in history: he is a problem or a resource in every country of the two American continents. Even in Canada, where the aboriginal population has always been small in comparison with that of Central or South America, the Indian has shown a remarkable capacity for survival. Abused in peace and in war, he has been saved by the vastness of the country and by his ability to adapt himself to his environment. Despite the alcohol and the disease of the white man, who neither sowed enough corn nor brought enough women with him, the Indian has succeeded against overwhelming odds in surviving, both biologically and culturally.

Under normal circumstances racial integration readily takes place between people having similar economic and cultural standards. Between the pre-literate, pre-industrial civilization of the Indians and the competitive, capitalistic civilization of the Europeans, there could be no easy integration. The two peoples could not, however, live together in the same country in complete isolation. Contact between them was inevitable; and contact just as inevitably posed the problem of acculturation. Despite their early superiority in numbers, the Indians were unable completely to withstand the impact of a more highly developed civilization. The general result of this impact was a break in the evolutionary rhythm, an upset in native economy and a rending of the social pattern of Indian life. The rate of breakdown in Indian culture varied according to time and place. During the 17th century the gap between the economic standards of the Indians and those of the colonizing Europeans, great as it was, was less than it is today; and Eastern Canadian Indians had thus a better opportunity and a longer period in which to recover their equilibrium than the Indians of Western Canada, who did not feel the full force of European civilization until the middle of the 19th century.

### II

From the date of Jacques Cartier's voyage up the "River of Canada" under the guidance of Indians from Gaspé, the histories of the two racial groups, Indian and European, have moved forward hand in hand. Had it not been for Donnaconna's Indians during the winter of 1535-6 it is doubtful whether any of Cartier's sailors would have survived the ravages of scurvy to recount the marvels of the St. Lawrence to their friends and relatives at home. As New France grew in size and importance the Indian became more and more an essential part of its historical background. To the Frenchman in Canada the

Indian became a purveyor of raw furs, a backwoods fighter of great skill, and a soul to be saved. He became an object of interest to trader, governor and missionary alike.

The economic alliance between the French and the Algonkian Indians forged by Champlain is one of the important factors in the history of the Ancien Regime; and the role of the Indian in the Canadian fur trade is well known. Less fully appreciated is the effect of this alliance upon the Indians themselves. Competition was the essence of the white man's civilization. Competition placed a premium upon individualism and before the competitive individualism of the fur trade the group solidarity which characterised Indian culture, tended to disappear. As an individual, the Indian became dependent, not upon his own social organization or his own native skills, but upon the government of the white man and the weapons and articles of European manufacture which the white man had to sell.

The impact of the trader was emphasized when the Indian came into contact with the soldier and with the missionary. Both sought, in different ways, to bring about a modification of the Indian way of life for the benefit of the Indians' souls and for the material advantage of the colony. To both church and state, therefore, the Indian became a problem and a burden.

Both church and state attempted to find an answer to the problem of adjustment. The missal and the school book seemed, at first, to provide the obvious solution. If the Indian could be made into a good Christian he would, *ipso facto*, become a good Frenchman. Led by Father Le Jeune, the Jesuits began to teach little Indian boys in their seminary, while the Ursulines undertook to educate little Indian girls. But education did not prove to be the easy road to cultural integration; and in a few years the Jesuits abandoned the attempt to civilize the Indians by the simple process of educating a few Indian children in the French manner. In the *Relation* of 1642 Father Vimont stated that the Jesuits had given up the Seminary experiment "for good reasons, and especially because no notable fruit was seen among the Savages".<sup>1</sup>

Father Vimont's explanation is brief and to the point; but there were other factors which explain the failure of Le Jeune's boarding school experiment. Certainly neither devotion nor effort were lacking. The first great obstacle which the Fathers could not overcome was the unwillingness of the Indian parents to part with their children; the second was the unwillingness of the Indian children to remain within the four walls of a school far from the woods and the streams which they loved and far from their own kindred. The school was for them no more than a cage. They longed for the liberty of the hunt and the chase; they wanted neither the food, clothes, catechism, studies nor the restrictive regulations of the boarding school. At best a few would remain but one or two years, and then return home with a smattering of useless knowledge to revert all too soon to the ways which were familiar to them.

<sup>1</sup>*The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* 1610-1781. Edit. R. G. Thwaites, (Cleveland, 1896-1901), XXIV, 103.

It was clear to the church that if any progress were to be made, it would be made only in sedentary communities. Nothing could be done with the Indians in their semi-migratory state. Accordingly special Indian "reserves" or sedentary colonies were established by the Church at Sillery, Caughnawaga, Oka and St. Francois. Here the Indians were encouraged to settle down; here they were exposed to Christian precept and example; here they were taught a little farming and gardening as the first step towards self-sufficiency. Here is the beginning of the alliance between bible and plough which has been the main feature of Canadian Indian policy from the 17th century to the present time.

The state had a different solution for the Indian problem. It was the policy of racial and cultural assimilation. The Jesuits had toyed with this solution in the early days of the colony but had given it up. Lacking first-hand knowledge of the difficulties experienced by the church, theorists and pedagogues in France argued that the Indian problem in Canada would be solved easily by the simple process of education and by intermingling the two races. They professed to believe that the primitive Indian, seeing the material advantages of European civilization would seek to emulate the Europeans and to copy their ways.<sup>2</sup>

The policy of education and assimilation, known as the policy of *francisation*, was put into effect by Talon and Frontenac. But neither governor nor intendant had any real appreciation of the nature of the Indian problem. They had not studied the problems of racial contact in other parts of the world. They knew nothing of the difficulties, complexities and delays necessarily attending any scheme of assimilation. They had no real interest in the Indian as a human being, except insofar as he contributed to the material wealth of the colony by trading furs or to the defence of the colony by participating in Frontenac's war parties. The governor might take several Indian children into his own household; he might belabour the Jesuits for their unwillingness to carry out the King's wishes regarding *francisation*; but from 1679 it is clear from his own correspondence that he, no less than the Jesuits, had begun to realize the futility of trying to turn large numbers of Indians into Frenchmen either by inter-marriage or by educating a few of them in French schools. The Great Onontio might understand enough Indian psychology to don an Indian headdress, wave a tomahawk and orate like an Indian chief; but he had no real contribution to make to the problem of acculturation.

By the beginning of the 18th century the state had pretty well washed its hands of the Indian problem. It was content to leave it in the hands of those who had first grappled with it, the missionaries. Henceforth one looks in vain in the governor's and in the

<sup>2</sup>This argument possesses remarkable powers of longevity. It has been used to justify the location of small Indian reserves in close proximity to white settlements such, for instance, as the Musqueam, Kitsilano, and Capilano Indian reserves at Vancouver. There might be some justification for arguing that these areas are the traditional homes of the bands in question — Simon Fraser refers to the Indian village of Musqueam — but none for arguing that their proximity to Vancouver is a moral advantage to the Indians or to the whites.

intendant's letters for constructive suggestions as to how the civil authorities might deal with the problem of cultural conflict. The one interest which the state retained in the Indian was purely selfish; the maintenance of the native alliances and the exploitation of the Indians as military auxiliaries for the defence of Canada. Indian policy did not extend beyond the giving of presents. It was far cheaper to hold the friendship of the Indian with a few gifts of rat-teen, blankets, powder, lead and vermilion war-paint than to maintain a large standing army on the frontiers of New France.

### III

The attitude of the Englishman towards the Indian was quite different from that of the Frenchman. Neither economically nor religiously was the native aboriginal an object of solicitude. The Indian trade, while important to the Anglo-American colonies, was never, as it was in Canada, the very life-blood of European settlement. Nor did the Puritan divine, like the Jesuit priest, look upon the Indian as a soul to be saved. He was, instead, a Canaanite, an enemy of God's chosen people, to be humbled or struck down in accordance with the instructions of Jehovah. There were exceptions to this uncompromising attitude, like Roger Williams; there were missions for the Indians; but few Protestant missionaries, save the German Moravians, went out into the wilderness. Owing to this indifference and hostility towards the aboriginal peoples, the history of the Anglo-American frontier was one of wars, massacres and exterminations.

As the political threat from Canada became more and more of a reality, the Anglo-American colonists began to turn towards the Indians. "If we lose the Iroquois we are gone", wrote William Penn's New York representative in 1702'. The Six Confederate Nations were the best organized and the most feared Indians of the eastern half of the continent and they, living south of Lake Ontario between the western shores of Lake Champlain and the Niagara river, held the key to the northern gateway of the English Colonies in America. Were Frontenac and his Canadians to capture New York, the English hold on the northern colonies would be precarious and English penetration to the west impossible. For reasons of security and security alone the Iroquois alliance became a cardinal feature of Anglo-American Indian policy.

With the outbreak of the last long battle for the control of northern North America, it became essential for the Anglo-Americans to ensure the support of the Iroquois Indians. As a result, Sir William Johnson, whose intercourse with the Mohawk had been to say the least friendly, was appointed by the Commander-in-Chief as Superintendent of Indian Affairs, an appointment which was subsequently approved by the crown. Johnson was to be responsible for the conduct of relations with the Indians and it was largely as a result of Johnson's influence that the Mohawk played so important a part in the Seven Years War.

Friendly relations with the Indians had been imposed upon the Anglo-Americans by military necessity. But military necessity did not impose upon the British authorities any policy beyond the

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in W. C. MacLeod, *The American Indian Frontier*, (London 1928).

traditional promises and presents which were periodically doled out to the Indian nations. There was no real appreciation of the problems arising out of the increasing pressure upon the Indians by the expanding white settlements. Johnson saw the war-clouds gathering but his warnings went unheeded until Pontiac lighted the torches of warfare along the whole of the western frontier. In October 1763 George III took steps to deal with the situation. A proclamation was issued which, among other items, set aside a large western Indian territory and promised that the native peoples would not be "molested or disturbed in the Possession of such Parts of our Dominions and Territories as, not having been ceded to or purchased by Us, are reserved to them, or any of them as their Hunting Grounds".<sup>4</sup> The Proclamation strictly prohibited all royal governors from making grants of land beyond the boundaries of their individual jurisdictions and forbade all private land purchases from the Indians. In effect the Proclamation laid down three main principles; that the Indians possessed rights of prior occupancy, although not of sovereignty, over all lands not formally surrendered by them; that all land surrenders to be legal must be made to the crown alone; and that all persons unlawfully occupying Indian lands should be expelled by authority of the crown. These principles constituted a great step in advance in dealing with the Indians. The Proclamation was the first serious attempt made by the British government to deal with the Indian problem and it laid the foundation for the treaty system which was to become the corner-stone of British, and later Canadian, Indian policy.

The principles enunciated by the Proclamation were not, however, immediately put into effect. Not until after the outbreak of the American rebellion, when the need arose for obtaining and retaining Indian support, were steps taken to give effective implementation to the new policy. Between 1781 and 1836 no less than twenty three land surrenders, miscalled treaties, were arranged with the Chippewa, Mississauga, Ottawa, Mohawk and other Indians of southern Ontario. In each case the Indians were given a *quid pro quo* in goods or money.<sup>5</sup>

The treaty system was quite frankly a policy of expediency. It was designed to forestall quarrels between the Indians and whites over land, to facilitate the spread of white settlements, and to maintain the traditional military alliance with the Indians. It was not intended to help the Indian adjust himself culturally or economically. This being the object of the treaty system, it was completely successful. Both during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 the Indians fought on the British side. Some, like Burgoyne or Procter might cast doubts upon their value as military auxiliaries, but few who read the story of both wars will question the contribution of men like Joseph Brant and John Deserontyon, Tecumseh and Blackbird.

#### IV

The treaty system soon revealed its deficiencies. The country, Upper Canada in particular, was beginning to fill up with im-

<sup>4</sup>*Documents Relating to the Constitutional History of Canada 1759-1791*, Edit. A. Short and A. G. Doughty, (Canadian Archives, Ottawa, 1918), I, 166.

<sup>5</sup>For the terms of these land surrenders see *Indian Treaties and Surrenders from 1680 to 1890*, (Ottawa, 1891), 2 vols.

migrants, and roving bands of Indians living by the chase and meeting periodically to receive the government bounty could not longer be tolerated. By the 1830's the humanitarian movement in Great Britain, which we associate with the names of Wilberforce and Shaftesbury, had spread to Canada; and the Indians, for the first time during the British regime, became an object of philanthropic solicitude. Indian policy took on a new direction. Responsibility for helping the native aboriginal bridge the gap between his own primitive culture and the civilization of the European became the dominant motif. In 1830 the control of Indian affairs was taken out of the hands of the Commander-in-Chief and placed in those of the Lieutenant-Governor. The Indians were encouraged to settle down upon the special "reserves" which had been promised them. Annuities, which had been introduced into the treaty system as a partial substitute for the old policy of giving presents, but which had all too often gone into alcohol, were applied towards building houses and purchasing agricultural implements. The religious denominations redoubled their missionary efforts; and the old alliance of bible and plough, which the Jesuits had started two centuries earlier at Sillery, was revived in Upper Canada.

The mid-19th century thus witnessed a major change in the role of the Indians in our history. From allies and companions-in-arms who had fought in defence of European interests in Canada since the days of Frontenac, Vaudreuil, Butler and Brock, the Indians became wards of the government. In 1856 a Royal Commission was set up in Upper Canada to find "the best means of securing the future progress and civilization of the Indian tribes in Canada" and the "best mode of so managing Indian property as to secure its full benefit to the Indians without impeding the settlement of the country". The commissioners, with their eyes upon the experience of the United States with its Indian migrations, its broken government promises and its Indian wars, were determined to avoid the mistakes of their neighbours. They therefore advanced suggestions designed to protect the Indians from "contamination by the white settlers" but, at the same time, to encourage intercourse between the two peoples in such a way that the Indians "would assimilate the habits" of the white man.<sup>6</sup> This policy of wardship was handed over to the Canadian government by the British authorities in 1860 and passed on to the federal government in 1867. It was formally solidified in the first federal Indian Act which was passed at Ottawa in 1876. By Confederation the pattern of Canadian Indian policy was clearly outlined; and the remarks of the Secretary of the Indian Affairs Branch in 1939 when he told the Toronto University-Yale University Seminar Conference on Indian affairs "Two distinct but complementary principles have guided Canadian Indian policy-protection and advancement",<sup>7</sup> simply echoed the words of the provincial commissioners of 1856.

<sup>6</sup>*Report of the Special Commissioners appointed on the 8th of September 1856 to investigate Indian Affairs in Canada*, Toronto, 1858, 126.

<sup>7</sup>T. R. L. McInnes, "The History and Policies of Indian Administration in Canada" in *The North American Indian Today*, Edit. C. T. Loram and T. F. McIlwraith, (Toronto, 1943) 157.

There is no need to expand upon the history of the treaty system as applied to Western Canada where, since 1871, eleven treaties have been negotiated extinguishing the Indian title in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and the North West Territories. All were cut from the same basic pattern. The treaties provided for the cession of all aboriginal rights in return for the recognition of certain chiefs and headmen, cash annuities, the establishment of reserves, and other miscellaneous concessions regarding fishing and hunting, the maintenance of schools and the furnishing of agricultural supplies. These treaties are without provision for termination; they are to last "as long as the sun rises and the water flows".<sup>a</sup>

One or two comments, however, should be made about the western treaties. In the first place they were not really "negotiated" treaties in the proper sense of the word. The concessions granted to the Indians were never made in deference to the demands or wishes of the Indians. Discussion was confined to an explanation of the terms. The Indians could not change these terms; they were given only one power of acceptance or refusal. The fact is that the Indians never understood what was happening. They did not understand the legal concept of individual ownership in land. They appreciated the principle of *usufruct*; and many of the chiefs thought that they were yielding to the whites only the right to use the land, not the right of exclusive private ownership. It was this misunderstanding which lay behind Canada's only Indian rising which occurred in 1885 when several of the Indian bands of the Saskatchewan valley joined the armed protest of the métis. That the rising did not become more widespread may be attributed in part to the long standing friendship between the Indians and the Hudson's Bay Company, to the caution of the Blackfoot chief, Crowfoot, to the efforts of Father Lacombe and the Rev. John McDougall, and to the prompt action of the Canadian government in sending food stuffs to the loyal Indians and militia against the recalcitrant bands.

In the second place British Columbia remained outside the treaty system. The factors which had led to the adoption of this system in other parts of Canada did not obtain in the mid 19th century on the Pacific coast. Moreover, the prevalence of a fishing economy seemed to lessen the significance of land as an essential part of Indian economy. As a result, although the provincial governor might set aside "reserves" for the native population as a matter of charity, he recognised no aboriginal rights in the soil and entered into no treaties with the Indians for the extinguishment of these rights. In brief, the situation in British Columbia resembled that in Quebec where reserves had been established during the Ancien Regime as a matter of grace and charity only.

When British Columbia entered Confederation in 1871 Indian affairs became a federal responsibility; but since the control of public lands remained a provincial matter, it was impossible for the federal authorities to alter the policy already adopted by the former administration to any substantial degree. Since the Indians of British Columbia signed no treaties, neither did they receive cash annuities

<sup>a</sup>A. Morris, *The Treaties of Canada with the Indians of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories*, (Toronto, 1880), 75.

like their prairie kindred. To meet this situation a special appropriation is passed annually to provide additional services in lieu of annuities. The most obvious result of this apparent discrepancy has been a series of long drawn out controversies with the British Columbia Indians from which other parts of Canada have, on the whole, been spared.

## V

There are today approximately 125,000 Indians in Canada.<sup>9</sup> From Nova Scotia to British Columbia Indians are to be found, some of them little distinguishable biologically from their European neighbours and living to a large degree in the European manner; others are still in the process of transition; still others follow a semi-migratory way of life similar to that of their forefathers. For all these Indians the Canadian government has the same object; to train them in habits of self-support within the general economic structure of the country, and to encourage them to adopt the religions and the culture of the whites. Tutelage and guardianship are the means, and complete enfranchisement, the end. The bitter destiny towards which they move is cultural extinction, or to put it more mildly, cultural assimilation.

This policy has its dangers. Too often the Indians, deprived of their traditional modes of life have merely formed islands of malnutrition, disease and ignorance. Too often tutelage and wardship have become goals in themselves to the discouragement of initiative. Moreover, cultural assimilation is offensive to any human being possessing a strong sense of national identity. Those responsible for the conduct of Indian affairs have endeavoured to extinguish this sense of identity; but it still remains among many Indians. In North and South America there is a definite renaissance of Indian national feeling. In Canada, where the number of Indians is small, national revival is, as yet, scarcely apparent, except perhaps in the organization of the several Indian brotherhoods and in the increasingly critical interest displayed by the Indians in the administration of Indians affairs at Ottawa. Elsewhere, however, Pan-Indianism is growing; witness the foundation of the *Instituto Indigenista Interamericano*, the Pan-Indian conferences held at Patzcuaro (Mexico) in 1940 and at Cuzco (Peru) in 1948, the publication of two periodicals, *America Indigena* and the *Boletín Indigenista*, and the setting aside of April 19, as a national Pan-Indian holiday. This national movement is just beginning. If and when Pan-Indianism seizes the imagination of the 40,000,000 native aboriginal peoples in the western hemisphere, we must not delude ourselves that the ripples at least of this continental movement will not reach the Indian nations living on the periphery. Indian nationalism has not been unknown in our history—the names of Pontiac, Brant, Tecumseh and Big Bear, spring to our minds. It may, under the inspiration of strong leadership, once more become an active factor in Canadian history.

<sup>9</sup>The Indian population in 1944 totalled 125,686, marking an increase of 11 per cent in a period of ten years.