Canada and the Aboriginal Peoples 1867—1927

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His recent work has focused on the history of relations between Aboriginal peoples and newcomers in Canada. His publications in this area include: Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press [UTP], 1989; rev. ed., 1991); Sweet Promises: A Reader on Indian-White Relations in Canada (Toronto: UTP, 1991); Big Bear [Mistahimusqua] (Toronto: ECW Press, 1996); and Shingwauk’s Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools (Toronto: UTP, 1996).
Confederation established a federal government with jurisdiction over 100,000 to 120,000 "Indians and lands reserved for the Indians." The responsibility brought with it a challenge vast and complicated. At the time and across the continent, diverse Aboriginal communities found themselves in various states of interaction with Euro-Canadians. The Canadian government faced the monumental task of developing policies for this heterogeneous population. The dimensions of the job and the pressures of time were but two of the factors that help to explain why Canada made such a poor job of its relations with the Aboriginal peoples in the decades after Confederation.

The Atlantic region alone presented a complex set of conditions. In Newfoundland (not a province until 1949) the last Beothuk died in 1829, her people victims of European disease, especially tuberculosis, and economic competition. By the 1860s perhaps 150 Micmac in the interior of the island subsisted, in part through traditional hunting-fishing-gathering practices, and in part through casual employment and sales to settlers. On the Labrador coast, the Inuit exhibited another typical form of cultural interaction through their involvement in trade with Europeans and Christian ministrations by Moravian missionaries. The other Atlantic island province, Prince Edward Island (joining Canada in 1873), was primarily agricultural. Land was set aside for the Micmac relatively late. "Reserves" were created at Morell River in 1859 and on Lennox Island in 1870. When it joined the Dominion in 1873, PEI's population included some 300 Micmac.

Nova Scotia and New Brunswick contained roughly ten percent of the 30,000 Indians residing in the four original provinces of the Dominion. Prior to Confederation, settlement and agricultural development in Nova Scotia had marginalized the mainly Micmac population, resulting in their concentration on Cape Breton and near Shubenacadie in the centre of the province. A system of reserves had not developed, and the colonial administration had allowed squatters to purchase Native lands. Although the proceeds from such sales were supposed to be collected in a fund to support the Indians, little had accumulated by Confederation. Nova Scotia's Micmac were a demoralized and marginalized people who survived through casual employment, the sale of handicrafts and produce, and alms. In New Brunswick, where reserves had been created, the situation was
little better for the Micmac, Maliseet, and Abenaki population of about 2,100. Sales of reserved land from the 1840s to the mid-1860s had not produced a very large Indian fund, but had reduced Native lands by about one-sixth. Save in northern New Brunswick, where unharvested timber in some districts permitted the continuation of a subsistence-level economy, most Aboriginal peoples were as dislocated and dependent as those in Nova Scotia. Little wonder, then, that Canada's first Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, William Spragge, said "philanthropic effort" was required in the Maritimes "to bring them [indigenous people] up, to at least, the standard of the more advanced Indian communities of the Provinces of Ontario and Quebec."

Spragge's reference to "the more advanced Indians" reflected the fact that Quebec's Native population, though highly diverse over all, could be divided into two categories. In the Shield country north of the agricultural lands, the largely Cree, Montagnais, and Naskapi (now Innu) groups continued the hunting-gathering patterns that had existed before the coming of the Europeans. There were pinpoints of Catholic missions in the north, especially near James Bay, but until colonization and hydroelectric development began to push northward in the latter decades of the century, Natives in Quebec's north remained relatively undisturbed. In the south, in the agriculturally oriented river valleys, approximately five thousand of the province's 8,600 Natives had congregated on reserves. Most of these reserves, such as Sillery or the forerunner of Oka (Kanesatake), had been mission refuges for groups of Mohawk, Abenaki, Algonkin, and Nipissing who were either alienated from religious traditionalists in their home communities or victims of punishing wars by rival nations. At centres such as Lorette, Becancour, south shore Montreal (Kahnawake), or St. Regis (Akwesasne), groups of Natives pursued a mixed economy of traditional harvesting, casual employment in nearby urban areas, and sale of handicrafts and natural goods to Euro-Canadians. If the residents of these Quebec reserves were "more advanced" in the eyes of the deputy minister, it was principally because the education provided by missionaries in day schools fostered acculturation. Certainly, the perceived "advancement" of these communities had little to do with state action, for the only important civil enactment in the colonial period had been an 1850 statute that incidentally defined for the first time who was an "Indian."

Neighbouring Ontario had a more extensive array of civil policies that affected the roughly 12,000 Native peoples who dwelt within its boundaries. In the more southerly regions, which had been populated
mainly by groups of Mississauga when officialdom began to plan for their settlement in the 1780s, treaty-making became an especially notable policy development. East of the Ottawa River there were no treaties by which Native occupiers had agreed to surrender or share their lands with the newcomers, although there were important pacts of peace and friendship in Nova Scotia and Quebec. In Ontario, by contrast, a pattern of establishing treaties, or treating with, indigenous occupiers for access to their lands had developed on the foundation of the Royal Proclamation of 1763. Among other things, this imperial edict designated territories west of the Ottawa River and south of the lower Great Lakes as lands “reserved to them [indigenous people] . . . as their Hunting Grounds,” and specified how such tracts might be acquired legally from the Natives. Proclamation policy restricted the right to obtain Aboriginal lands to the crown’s representatives, and required that officials negotiate for land only at a “public meeting” of Natives “called for the purpose.” The Proclamation was designed to avoid clashes between intrusive settlers and indigenous landholders by regulating the acquisition of Native lands. In the 1770s and 1780s the British obtained lands north of the lower Great Lakes by treating with the Mississauga, and this practice was repeated following the American Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 to obtain peaceful access to lands for both Natives, especially the Mohawk, and European settlers in a series of treaties. This method of negotiating surrender of tracts of land in return for compensation continued in the 1820s and 1830s until virtually all of southern Ontario was covered.

The Robinson-Huron and Robinson-Superior agreements of 1850 demonstrated that treaty-making in Ontario was not invariably driven by the requirements of the Royal Proclamation alone. In the mid-1840s the colonial legislature authorized mining exploration in Ojibwa lands near Lake Huron. Many Ojibwa protested the intrusion, and a group under Chief Shingwauk of Garden River (near Sault Ste. Marie) threatened the miners. Only after the intruders appealed to colonial officials for assistance did the colonial government commission W. B. Robinson to negotiate with the Ojibwa. The resulting Robinson treaties contained several notable features. First, they covered large areas, in contrast to the more limited southern treaties. Second, they promised that Natives could continue to hunt and fish throughout the territory surrendered until the land was occupied. And, finally, the treaties promised to create reserves.

Prior to 1850 the establishment of reserves in the future Ontario had been an ad hoc affair. Many early “reserves” were in fact Christian missions, such as the Methodists’ Credit Mission west of Toronto, where the
churches evangelized and assisted Natives whose economy was being disrupted by agriculture. In the 1830s a state-sponsored effort at setting up reserves was initiated in the Coldwater-Narrows region, but this attempt to tie Natives to an agricultural setting proved a failure and was abandoned. After 1846 the colonial government again tried to encourage Natives to relocate and settle, but encountered resistance from Native leaders who feared the loss of the small tracts they still controlled. By Confederation a reserve policy existed in Ontario, although its implementation was intermittent at best.

Enfranchisement represented the other significant policy initiative in Ontario. The government's intention in offering enfranchisement to Aboriginal people was to eliminate their separate status by conferring the rights and duties of Canadian citizenship. In convincing Aboriginal people to accept enfranchisement, the government hoped to bring about voluntary assimilation. The preferred approach was embodied in the Gradual Civilization Act of 1857, which repeated the definition of Indian, first enunciated in an 1850 Quebec statute. The Act then, paradoxically, laid out the process by which an "Indian" might cease to be one. Any adult male who was literate, debt-free, and of good moral character, with approval by a colonial government board, could be enfranchised and given a share of reserve land in freehold tenure. Moreover, his wife and his children and their descendants would be enfranchised along with him. The 1857 Act was noteworthy in its minimal short-term but relatively significant long-term impact. The enfranchisement provision retained importance because it carried over into post-Confederation policy and remains part of the Indian Act at the end of the twentieth century (though modified in one important respect in 1985). In its immediate application, however, the provision was ineffective, resulting in the enfranchisement of precisely one man in the period down to the codification of the Indian Act in 1876.

In part because Ontario politicians dominated the federal cabinets in the first few decades after Confederation, the civil policies of treaty-making, reserves, and enfranchisement typified the Canadian government's dealing with Aboriginal people in the West. The acquisition of Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company was an essential part of the Confederation agreement, and Ottawa turned to integrating the region quickly after 1867. Several diverse nations made up the 45,000 or more Aboriginal communities in the prairie west. In some ways the most distinctive were the people who called themselves "the New Nation," the roughly 12,000 mixed-blood peoples known to scholars as Métis or country-born. They
were the offspring of a fur trade that brought both British and Canadien merchants into contact with the western First Nations, and most were settled near the forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers in the future Manitoba. The largely French-speaking and Roman Catholic Métis were more numerous than their Anglophone and largely non-Catholic country-born cousins, and the latter may have become equivocal about their racial identity. Collectively they had emerged by the mid-nineteenth century as distinct in the West: a “New Nation.”

West and north of Red River were smaller settlements of Métis in the Saskatchewan District, as well as many tens of thousands of Plains Cree, Saulteaux (Western Ojibwa), Assiniboine, Dakota, and components of the Blackfoot Confederacy in the future Alberta. The Canadian government viewed the Plains peoples with respect and fear, for their numbers and martial skills made them a formidable potential enemy. However, the vitality of the economy that supported the Plains societies diminished with the steady decline of the buffalo herds. Before Confederation the competition for this resource widened a gulf between Plains Cree and Blackfoot and culminated in a destructive war. The loss of life to warfare and epidemics brought Plains leaders to search for peace, achieved finally in 1871.

To the west, beyond the mountains, lay dozens of other First Nations that the Canadian government would only slowly come to know. Both in the British Columbia interior and on its lush coast, Aboriginal communities still dominated, though their numbers were diminishing. Relations between British Columbia Indians and Europeans had begun in a maritime fur trade in the 1770s and evolved into a land-based commerce in pelts in the second decade of the nineteenth century, involving the interior and northern peoples as well. By the middle of the nineteenth century, disease had profoundly affected the indigenous population just as the opening of settlement and mining frontiers began to disrupt Aboriginal homelands. Between 1835 and 1885 British Columbia’s Aboriginal population declined, principally as a result of disease, from 70,000 to approximately 28,000. A shrinking population was one reason why treaty-making generally did not occur in British Columbia. In addition, mining and other forms of economic development led newcomers to covet Aboriginal lands, giving rise to a growing antipathy by both mother country and colony to recognizing indigenous rights and establishing treaties for access to Native lands. Save for some fourteen treaties covering limited tracts near Victoria, Nanaimo, and at the north end of Vancouver Island, British Columbia entered Confederation in 1871 with its territory uncovered by treaty.
As Ottawa prepared to deal with “Indians and lands reserved for the Indians” in 1867, then, it faced a large and heterogeneous Native population scattered across many thousands of kilometres. Moreover, no single pattern of interaction between Aboriginal peoples and newcomers had emerged, much less a uniform policy. Only in Ontario had a systematic method of dealing with the indigenous peoples been elaborated.

It was a combination of Ontario tradition, blunders, and threatened resistance that led the Dominion to make treaty hurriedly with the western Native peoples. Canada's efforts to extend its jurisdiction over Rupert's Land in 1869 provoked the resistance of the Métis and some country-born led by Louis Riel, thus stalling the process. In the end, the region entered the Dominion as the Province of Manitoba. Moreover, the Manitoba Act, which spelled out the terms of union, contained a provision for granting 1.4 million acres (567,000 ha) to children of mixed-blood families in recognition that they shared in the “Indian title” to the region. The Red River Resistance reminded Canada that attempts to assert control before treating with the local population resulted in complications. The Manitoba Act recognized, as well, the need to address “Indian title.”

The First Nations themselves indicated that the government would be wise to negotiate with them for peaceful access to these lands before settlers arrived in large numbers. A minority voice came from chiefs such as Sweet Grass, who in 1871 sent a message from Fort Edmonton asking the Dominion to make treaty. More numerous were the Indians who delivered warnings that unauthorized intrusion and exploitation would result in difficulties. The Ojibwa in the northwest angle of the Lake of the Woods objected to the passage through their lands of road-builders and a military expedition, while Saulteaux near Portage la Prairie warned settlers not to cut wood on their lands. As well, Plains Cree in the Saskatchewan country in 1875 ordered both a telegraph-construction crew and a field party of the Geological Survey of Canada to cease and desist. In the same year, the Blackfoot of southern Alberta complained formally that strangers were invading their lands and hunting the buffalo. From intimations such as these, the Canadian government understood that only through negotiation could it promote immigration and settlement without bloodshed in the lands it had purchased from the Hudson's Bay Company. A military “solution” such as the neighbouring American republic was pursuing with the western Indian nations was simply out of the question on financial grounds alone.

For those Aboriginal leaders who wanted to make treaty—and it is essential to note that not all did—the motivation was fairly clear. The
Cree and Blackfoot were every bit as aware of the destruction and expense of Indian wars south of the “medicine line,” the international boundary, as was the government. They similarly recognized, in part because traders and missionaries in their midst had been telling them so, that settlers were going to come from Canada whether the First Nations were agreeable to the influx or not. In the southern portions of the North-West Territories some groups such as the Blackfoot also realized that the authority of the Queen’s Canadian government had had a beneficial effect since the arrival of the red-coated Mounted Police in 1874. Blackfoot Chief Crowfoot would later note gratefully that the horsemen had driven whiskey peddlers out of the Cypress Hills and southern Alberta posts, before the poison could debauch and destroy his people. Finally, and most important, the Plains nations were acutely conscious that the once-vast buffalo herds were dwindling. A number of Plains Cree and Blackfoot leaders were prepared to make treaty because they saw in a new relationship with the Queen’s government in Ottawa a source of sustenance, protection, and a means to make a living in a new way at a time of impending crisis. While the Ojibwa and Woods Cree, obviously, were less affected by crisis than the Plains peoples, some leaders among all the Aboriginal communities of the west perceived advantage in regulating the influx of strangers by means of a negotiated relationship with the newcomers’ government.

For the Christian missionaries who, like the Hudson’s Bay officers and policemen, played a minor role in the process, there were two reasons to advocate treaties. As outriders for a Euro-Canadian population, they shared the expansionist aims of the Dominion and interpreted the interest of their Native flocks within the framework of Canada’s objectives. The Oblates, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Methodists also were anxious about the future of the peoples whom they evangelized in the likely event of the disappearance of the buffalo. Most missionaries believed that exchanging a migratory hunting economy for sedentary agriculture was in Natives’ long-term economic interest, as much as it would facilitate Native conversions.

These varying motives underlay attempts in the 1870s to conclude treaties from the Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains, and from the “medicine line” to the northern edge of anticipated settlement. These motives, assumptions, and objectives combined to produce seven “numbered treaties” between Canada and the western First Nations between 1871 and 1877. Treaty 1, the Stone Fort Treaty, was negotiated in 1871 with Saulteaux and Swampy Cree in southern Manitoba. This was the one region of the West where a pre-existing treaty was to be found,
because in 1817 the Selkirk Treaty had secured belated access to Native lands along the Red and Assiniboine for the Selkirk Settlers. Treaty 2, also signed in 1871, covered southwestern Manitoba. Negotiations for Treaty 3, the North West Angle Treaty, were initiated with the Ojibwa and Cree of northwestern Ontario in 1870, but not concluded until three years later because of Native determination to secure their aims. Treaty 4, the Qu'Appelle, was signed with the Assiniboine, Cree, and Saulteaux of southern Saskatchewan in 1874. Treaty 5 brought the Natives of central Manitoba into treaty in 1875. Treaty 6, with the Plains Cree, was signed in two locations, Fort Carlton and Fort Pitt, in August and September of 1876. And, finally, the Blackfoot Treaty, Treaty 7, which covered the portion of Alberta south of Treaty 6, was concluded at Blackfoot Crossing in 1877.

Treaty-making in the 1870s combined both governmental and Aboriginal preoccupations. From Ottawa's standpoint the objective was to get commitments to surrender land and give obedience to the Canadian government as expeditiously and inexpensively as possible. In pursuit of that object, treaty commissioners at first were authorized to make treaty for land and political control in return for modest initial payments, annuities (annual payments), and limited reserves to be set aside for the Native peoples. However, government negotiators usually found fulfilling their mandate difficult in the face of Native demands and determination. Aboriginal negotiators were influenced by the concepts of relationship and reciprocity. The first meant that they sought assurances of peace and protection from the crown; some, such as the Plains chief, Big Bear, explicitly rejected any notion of Canada's sovereignty, at least until starvation forced him into treaty in 1882. Treaty 6 represents the most fully realized concept of a relationship between Canada and Natives that would protect the latter. This treaty provided assurances of government aid in the event of "pestilence" or "famine," as well as a "medicine chest."

For Aboriginal negotiators, achieving a reciprocal pact meant that they got something roughly equal in significance to what they were surrendering. They were giving up the exclusive control and utilization of a large territory, a land base that sustained them. Surely reciprocity meant that in return they would acquire new ways to guarantee their livelihood? The desire to have the treaties reciprocally embody means of subsistence led Native leaders to insist upon promises of farming implements, seed, and livestock; ammunition and twine for hunting and fishing; and even schools on reserves that would prepare their offspring to earn a living in ways approximating Euro-Canadian practice. Indeed, many of the most provident features of the numbered treaties resulted
from Aboriginal initiative, not government farsightedness. The same motives on the Native side led to a steady expansion of terms, most notably in the size of reserves promised, or the magnitude of the initial cash and annual payments. Early treaties promised reserves of 160 acres (65 ha) per family of five, for example, but most later ones quadrupled the figure.

At the end of the bargaining day in 1877, Canada attained its territorial objective, but at a far higher price than it had intended to pay. Most Native leaders believed they had secured their chief goal, a formal relationship with the Canadian government, although they had fallen short of other bargaining objectives. Almost as important as what was achieved was the fact that a significant minority of leaders declined to take treaty between 1871 and 1877. Most prominent among the Plains holdouts were Little Pine and Big Bear, important Cree leaders who would be forced into treaty by hardship after the buffalo dwindled away. Part of Big Bear's reason for holding out was his doubt that Ottawa would do what its treaty commissioners promised. By the early 1880s western Native leaders concluded that Big Bear had been right. Canada's implementation of the treaties was dilatory, niggardly, and legalistic. Native leaders, who had emphasized creating a relationship when they took treaty, were shocked and disheartened by the government's perfidy. When they and their descendants in the twentieth century talked of government violations of "the spirit" of the treaty, they were alluding to Ottawa's narrow interpretations, petitifogging enforcement, and grudging modifications of the letter of the numbered treaties.

Although negotiating the numbered treaties in the 1870s was an important chapter in the long history of Aboriginal-White relations, it would not be the last. After 1877 the government took the position that it did not want to treat for more land unless and until Euro-Canadian settlers and entrepreneurs demanded access to Native-controlled regions for economic purposes. That was part of the reason why British Columbia remained almost totally out of treaty until 1899, when Treaty 8 embraced its northeast corner. The onset of northern economic development, particularly the discovery of gold in Yukon, led to the negotiation of Treaty 8. Similarly, Treaty 9 in northern Ontario, Treaty 10 in northern Saskatchewan, and Treaty 5(b) in northern Manitoba were concluded in 1905, 1906, and 1908 in response to growing economic interest in the resources of these northlands. The final treaty of this period, Treaty 11, exemplified the point: it was negotiated with the Dene of part of the Northwest Territories in 1921, a year after oil was discovered at Norman Wells. The rest of the country—most of British Columbia, Yukon, part of
the Territories, and northern Quebec—would lie outside formal land treaty.

It was appropriate that the treaties of the 1870s promised both "reserves for farming lands" and implements and livestock with which to farm, because the phase that followed treaty-making was dominated by a complex of measures known as "the policy of the Bible and the plough." As the phrase implies, the policy led to a mix of programmes that relied heavily on missionary bodies and aimed at converting Aboriginal people into self-sufficient individuals who would earn their living in ways similar to, and compatible with, those of Euro-Canadians. While the immediate source of this policy was the need to develop programmes for Natives on the prairies and in British Columbia, many of its provisions were extended to First Nations throughout the country. And the most pervasive feature of post-Confederation policy was its assimilationist purpose. As the Indian Affairs Branch put it in 1871, it aimed "to lead the Indian people by degrees to mingle with the white race in the ordinary avocations of life."

Continuity between pre- and post-Confederation practice surfaced in the 1869 Gradual Enfranchisement Act. This statute, which applied to Indians in the central provinces only, retained the Gradual Civilization Act's provisions for voluntary enfranchisement. However, it also restricted the definition of "Indian" status by introducing the notion of a "blood quantum" or minimum percentage—in this case twenty-five—Aboriginal heritage, and it introduced an ominous novelty: an attack on Native self-government. The "blood quantum" remained a criterion of status for only a short time, but the assault on Native governance proved enduring. The 1869 Act allowed government to "order that the Chiefs of any tribe, band or body of Indians shall be elected," and potentially to remove "life Chiefs ... for dishonesty, intemperance or immorality." These vague criteria were to be interpreted, of course, by federal bureaucrats and politicians.

The governance provisions of the 1869 Enfranchisement Act would remain a core element in federal Indian policy for over a century, but the provisions concerning elective political institutions over time would become more coercive. In the first Indian Act (1876), the federal government broadened its self-bestowed power to depose hereditary chiefs, "for dishonesty, intemperance, immorality, or incompetency." An 1880 amendment empowered officials to impose an elected band council on a community whether it wanted European-style electoral procedures or not. More serious still was the Indian Advancement Act of 1884, which expanded somewhat the list of municipal-style powers a band council could have, but authorized Ottawa to depose chiefs whom federal officials
considered unfit or unable to discharge their duties. The potentially oppressive provisions of the Advancement Act became a permanent part of federal policy when they were integrated into the Indian Act of 1906. More short-lived was the clause of the general Franchise Act of 1885 that extended the right to vote in federal elections to adult male Indians east of Lake Superior. Enacted by Macdonald over vociferous Liberal objections, this provision was not widely used, and was eliminated in 1898 by the Laurier government.

As significant as the governance provisions were, they were only one part of a broad phalanx of initiatives. Central to the overall policy of the Bible and the plough was the concept of enfranchisement, which would remain part of the Indian Act beyond 1927. Here, as in the governance and other provisions, what novelty crept in during revisions lay in the direction of greater restriction and coercion. The 1869 Enfranchisement Act, for example, strengthened the gender discrimination inherent in the definition of “Indian” by providing that a female with Indian status who married a male without status, whether non-Native or simply non-status Indian, would lose her status forever. So, too, would her children and descendants. This discriminatory provision would remain a part of Canadian law until 1985. Another coercive attempt to foist enfranchisement on selected males did not last long. The original Indian Act conferred automatic enfranchisement on any man who graduated from university or entered one of the liberal professions such as law or religion. This measure was removed in the amending Act of 1880, but educated males and members of the professions remained eligible for voluntary, automatic enfranchisement. All these provisions had a consistent thread: they sought to whittle down the number of “Indians,” whether by marriage outside the community, voluntary enfranchisement, or loss of status through advanced education. Indian policy, in other words, aimed at converting “Indians” into citizens by the dubious legal mechanism of enfranchisement.

Other aspects of the policy of the Bible and the plough, such as schools and measures to attack Aboriginal cultural and spiritual traditions, had the same goal of reducing the number of “Indians” by assimilation. Missionaries in Upper Canada had emphasized schooling as an assimilation mechanism since the 1820s; in 1846 they and the Indian Department added a type of residential school known as a manual labour school. These institutions, like predecessors in seventeenth-century New France and late-eighteenth-century New Brunswick, had invariably proven futile. The problem was that Native peoples, though often wanting their young to learn skills in Euro-Canadian schools, rejected efforts to assimilate their
children and took exception to the schools' failure to look after their offspring adequately in residential institutions. In spite of this record, Canada proceeded to re-enact most of the earlier failures from 1883 on. The numbered treaties promised a "school on reserve," but government and Christian missionaries believed the on-reserve institutions inadequate both because they were plagued by poor attendance and because they were not effective as instruments of cultural assimilation.

As a consequence of this thinking, Ottawa enunciated a policy in 1883 that stressed what it called "industrial schools." These facilities would be operated by the missionary bodies and funded for the most part by the Department of Indian Affairs, which had been set up in 1880. The industrial schools were to train children in trades such as carpentry, blacksmithing, and shoemaking, as well as more modest pursuits such as farming for boys and domestic skills for girls. Both in classroom and workshop these schools, like contemporary educational institutions of all kinds, were gendered landscapes in which males were prepared for gainful employment outside the home and females were trained to manage the domestic sphere. The gendered approach to schooling was as prominent in the day schools, which continued to receive inadequate funding from Indian Affairs, as it was in the residential schools.

Between 1883 and 1923 an extensive school system developed. Industrial schools increased in number after the creation of the first three in the Territories in 1883, but the smaller boarding schools continued as well, and both types co-existed with numerous on-reserve day schools. Although the industrial school system was aimed initially at the prairie region, it quickly spread to BC and Ontario. In the latter case, it was largely a matter of declaring existing schools, such as the Shingwauk Home in Sault Ste Marie, to be industrial establishments. However, in the early twentieth century new industrial schools were created, particularly in northern and northwestern Ontario. With the exception of the southern shore of James Bay, no residential schools were created in Quebec until the middle of the twentieth century. Similarly, Maritime Canada did not have a modern Native residential school until the opening of Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia, in 1929. Residential schools were not provided in the east because missionaries and bureaucrats assumed that those Natives who lived near Euro-Canadians were sufficiently acculturated not to need custodial institutions, while groups such as the Cree and Inuit in northern Quebec were still making a living by traditional means until well into the twentieth century.
Throughout the country the number of industrial and boarding schools grew until, at the height of the system’s development in the 1920s, there were eighty such operations. Approximately three-fifths were run by the Oblates, Jesuits (one institution), and several organizations of female religious such as the Sisters of Charity, Grey Nuns, and Sisters of Saint Ann. Anglicans operated about one-quarter, while Methodists and Presbyterians were in charge of the remainder. Geographically the residential schools were concentrated in northwestern Ontario, the prairie region, British Columbia, and the Territories. For administrative purposes the separate categories of “industrial” and “boarding” schools were amalgamated under the heading of “residential schools” by Ottawa in 1923. As significant as residential schools were, they never housed more than a minority—probably one-third—of status Indian children down to the 1950s.

Even though their coverage was only partial, residential schools had a devastatingly negative impact. The institutions wreaked havoc principally for two reasons: aggressively assimilative practices and inadequate care. For both missionaries and bureaucrats, their primary aim was to convert Indian children to Euro-Canadian ways of life and methods of earning a living. In pursuit of that goal, school operators denigrated Aboriginal culture, usually combatting any use of a Native language aggressively, and tried to force Christian views and values on their charges. Often the assimilative programme took precedence over both the academic and vocational training provided, with the result that residential school products were inadequately equipped to compete with Euro-Canadians.

In recognition of these deficiencies, the Department scaled back the educational objectives of the schools in 1910, thus reducing their utility. In fact, the failure of residential schools to provide useful instruction to their children caused many parents to reject the institutions.

Parental opposition to residential schools grew as well because they were extremely dangerous places for young children. Diet and other aspects of care were inadequate, the staff often either were too few or ill-trained, the workload on children too heavy, and disease and death were ever-present dangers. The fact that the schools operated on a half-day system in which students spent half their time in the classroom and the other half in work opened the way to excessive demands for child labour, while impairing academic learning. In addition to these shortcomings, many schools harboured brutal workers who victimized children in numerous ways. The most common problem was pervasive use of excessive corporal punishment. As well, children of tender years found no emotional support in institutions governed by rules. Finally, there were instances of sexual
abuse, both of student against fellow student and of staff against the children under their care.

The damage caused by Ottawa's schooling initiative, especially residential schools, was also evident in other elements of the policy of the Bible and the plough. Again, the principal targets of measures designed to discourage and suppress Aboriginal cultural and spiritual traditions were Natives in British Columbia and the prairie provinces. In 1885, in response to demands from missionaries and some Native converts, the Indian Act was amended to outlaw the Potlatch, the sharing ceremony that was central to North West Coast First Nations. In 1894, when the initial measure to suppress the Potlatch proved unenforceable, the federal government amended the law to be more specific. At the same time, the law broadened the definition of rituals that were prohibited to include some prairie summer ceremonialis such as the Sun Dance of the Blackfoot and the Thirst Dance of the Cree and Saulteaux. The 1894 measure ostensibly meant to limit potentially dangerous practices such as piercing the body during prairie ceremonials. The fact that the amendment also outlawed any sharing or giving away of property made clear that Aboriginal values and communal bonds were under attack. The measures against the Potlatch and prairie dance ceremonials were also difficult to enforce; on the Pacific coast enforcement was sporadic, though sometimes spectacular. The arrest in 1922 of fifty-eight Kwagiulth Potlatchers, and the seizure of a vast quantity of ceremonial regalia, provides the clearest example of how disruptive the measure could be. In the prairie region, enforcement of the 1894 ban on summer dancing was more extensive and persistent, but the prohibition never succeeded in extirpating the practice, though it sometimes created a climate of fear and resentment. The ban on the Potlatch and prairie dancing would be repealed in the 1951 revision of the Indian Act.

It was no coincidence that the industrial schools policy and the Potlatch ban both took shape in the mid-1880s. This period in fact saw a hardening of attitudes towards Native peoples and increasing resort to coercion. To some degree this harsher atmosphere resulted from the Northwest Rebellion of 1885; certainly bureaucrats became more willing to use coercion in their dealings with Native peoples after the Métis rising. However, the Rebellion was more excuse than reason, for only a tiny minority of First Nations communities took up arms, and these few usually were cases of hard-pressed young men resorting to violence in the heat of the moment. Nonetheless, the Rebellion gave rise to one of the most notorious elements of Indian Affairs policy. As an emergency measure,
the Department in May 1885 prohibited prairie Indians from being off their reserve without the permission of the Indian Agent. The restriction persisted after the cessation of hostilities, becoming known as the pass system. Since the pass system had no legal basis, and since the Mounted Police refused to enforce it after 1892, it is not clear how effective it was or even how long Indian Affairs tried to use it.

The pass system was part of an arsenal of weapons used by Ottawa in its efforts to control and reshape Native behaviour, especially on the prairies. A particularly pernicious example could be found in ill-advised policies supposedly intended to "encourage" the development of agriculture among Plains peoples who became destitute after the collapse of the buffalo economy. Officially, Indian Affairs attempted to assist these groups to make the transition to agriculture by supplying them with livestock and equipment, by providing agricultural instructors, and briefly in the 1880s, by operating demonstration farms near reserves where Indians could observe the successful operation of a Euro-Canadian farm. Unfortunately, the reality was disheartening. Often equipment and other necessities were supplied dilatorily, if at all. Many of the farming instructors had little knowledge of local conditions and the climatic challenges of dryland farming. Nor were the demonstration farms especially helpful, for instructors often preferred to operate these tracts on their own, without making an effort to explain agricultural practices to would-be farmers.

Between 1889 and 1897, while Hayter Reed was influential in Indian Affairs, western reserve agricultural policy was particularly pernicious and damaging. Ottawa had already adopted a so-called severalty policy, mimicking the American Dawes or Allotment Scheme, that encouraged the subdivision of communal reserves into individual plots. Theoretically, individual ownership would encourage entrepreneurship and effort; in reality, reserve farmers frustrated the scheme by ignoring the policy. Since the severalty plan required at least minimal cooperation from bands, Native non-compliance effectively defeated it. However, Reed, first as Commissioner (1888–93) and then Deputy Minister (1893–97), imposed another of his schemes, "peasant farming," on some western reserves. The peasant farming policy, which was based on current theories of social evolution, held that Plains peoples must move from migratory hunting through peasant or subsistence farming before they could emerge into large-scale commercial farming that employed modern machinery. Accordingly, they were required to sow seed by hand, cut their grain with sickles rather than mechanized reapers, and extract the valuable grain from chaff with flails rather than mechanical harvesters.
Indian Affairs' influence in local communities usually prevented implement dealers from selling such equipment, and the fact that the Indian Act made it impossible to mortgage reserve land ensured that bands would not be able to borrow to purchase modern equipment. (A permit system that required reserve farmers to get written authorization from the Indian Agent before taking their crop to market also made it difficult to obtain cash.) Indeed, there is reason to believe that opposition from non-Native farmers to what they called "subsidized competition" for limited local markets was a powerful motive for Ottawa's attempts down to 1897 to pursue the peasant farming folly. While no systematic analysis of this ill-starred policy throughout the prairies exists, a detailed study of Treaty 4 suggests persuasively that the frustrations of peasant farming visited on reserve farmers pushed many communities back into apathy and dependence on government rations just as immigration and settlement were beginning to make reserve lands valuable. The conjunction of the apparent failure of reserve agriculture and an influx of settlers meant that parcels of reserve land were obtained by a variety of means, many of them unconscionable if not illegal, by Indian Affairs to respond to the demand for land. The effect of misguided developmental policies such as peasant farming was to render most western reserves pockets of hardship rather than sites of development.

As severalty and peasant farming illustrate, Native peoples responded in many ways to the attempts to control them politically, reshape them culturally, and mould them economically. While the detailed research that would allow confident generalizations has not yet been carried out, it would appear that while some groups acquiesced to Ottawa's intrusion, many others resisted vigorously. The Mohawk population at Akwesasne (St. Regis), for example, opposed with armed resistance Indian Affairs' attempts to replace their hereditary political structures with elective institutions. Similarly, many Plains people flouted the prohibitions on dancing, just as numerous North West Coast nations adjusted their Potlatch or took their observances underground to avoid the prying eyes of missionaries and agents. In schooling, especially residential schools, the patterns were similar. Some groups, such as the White Bear band in Saskatchewan, simply boycotted missionaries and residential schools as part of a strategy of pursuing a traditional way of life that included a mixed economy rather than farming. Other communities gave the appearance of cooperating with missionaries and bureaucrats, although in many cases traditional practices persisted clandestinely.
Whatever successes Native communities had in combatting the policy of the Bible and plough, it nonetheless had destructive consequences. Even groups that resisted attempts to change them politically, spiritually, and economically were still subject to the demoralizing impact of official censure and Christian denigration. For children who attended residential schools, these psychological blows were probably even stronger than those experienced by their parents. Moreover, the residential schools inflicted a heavy loss of life on the student populations. During the Great War, the Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs acknowledged in writing that up to half of residential school inmates did not live to use the knowledge they acquired in these institutions. As the horrific rates of disease and death in these schools indicate, the policy of the Bible and the plough had serious consequences for Native peoples, even if the individual measures were often ineffective in their original intentions.

As the twentieth century rolled on, Indian Affairs responded to the failure of its policy of cultural transformation with its usual approach of continuity and change. The continuation of obsolete practices was attributable to bureaucratic dimness and missionary opposition to change. For example, as noted earlier, when entrepreneurs became interested in northern resource development, Ottawa responded with treaties that differed little from the measures that had failed in the prairies. On the other hand, when the Liberal government of Sir Wilfrid Laurier tried by 1910 to phase out some of the worst residential schools and replace them with what it called “new improved day schools,” the opposition of the Catholics and some non-Catholic missionaries in western Canada made eliminating schools politically impossible. The best that Ottawa could do was insist on better standards for health and care. With minor tinkering, schooling policy would stumble on until new ideological suppositions and improved finances made real change possible after the Second World War.

A novel aspect of government policy in the twentieth century was greater use of coercion, most notably with the land issue in British Columbia. For example, since schools of all kinds did not seem to work the transformations bureaucrats desired, the Indian Act was changed by a series of amendments from 1894 on to create and enforce compulsory attendance. A similar pattern prevailed with the prohibitions on the Potlatch and prairie dancing. Enforcement difficulties constituted one of the reasons why Parliament in 1918 amended the Indian Act to allow agents, who were also magistrates, to deal with breaches of this measure as summary rather than indictable offences. This alteration allowed agents
to act as police and judge, avoiding regular courts that could not always be counted on to convict.

However, a more outrageous example of the greater reliance on coercion was found in enfranchisement. Provisions allowing adult males to give up Indian status and become citizens, a core provision of the Indian Act, had consistently failed to produce sufficient enfranchisements. Finally, at the behest of long-serving official Duncan Campbell Scott, the Union government introduced involuntary enfranchisement for selected males in 1919. Status women who married men without Indian status had lost their status since the 1869 Enfranchisement Act. A few males who achieved higher education and professional status had been at risk of losing their status from 1876 to 1880. Now Ottawa proposed to strip status from any Indian men whom the Department deemed ready for the change. This involuntary enfranchisement clause was repealed two years later after a change of government, but the fact that it was ever on the books reflected the government's exasperation at the failure of its policy. Involuntary enfranchisement would return to the Act in modified form in 1933 and remain until the 1951 revision.

Unthinking continuity and coercive innovation could also be found in Canada's handling of the British Columbia land question. As already noted, very little territory there was covered by treaty during the colonial period, and the terms of union in 1871 required the province to transfer crown lands to Ottawa "in trust for the use and benefit of the Indians." The national government found that even its modest proposals for reserves in British Columbia provoked strenuous opposition from Victoria. Inability to reach agreement on how much land was to be allocated to reserves produced a breakdown by the 1880s, just as First Nations in British Columbia began to protest against incursions on their lands. Ottawa established a commission to draw up boundaries, but numerous meetings with Native groups in the 1880s and 1890s produced little progress, thanks to stubborn provincial opposition.

On the eve of the Great War, the two levels of government, recognizing that further delay would only worsen matters, established a joint royal commission to review the allocations for reserve lands that had already been made. Although many bands hoped that the McKenna-McBride Commission, as it became known, would produce larger allocations, the results of the commission's work represented a setback. When McKenna-McBride reported in 1916, it recommended making about 47,000 acres (19,035 ha) of existing reserve land available to settlers, compensating the bands with approximately 87,000 acres (35,235 ha) that were usually poorly
located and less valuable. These menacing recommendations galvanized many of British Columbia's First Nations into combining forces for political action. Indeed, the land question had earlier stimulated political protest by the Squamish, whose chief, Joe Capilano, in 1906 had travelled to London to petition the crown, and by the Nisga'a who in 1913 addressed a petition to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. In 1916, British Columbia Natives organized the Allied Tribes of British Columbia, a broadly based movement to combat the McKenna-McBride proposals. The Allied Tribes agitated energetically against McKenna-McBride without much noticeable result, their campaign culminating in an appearance before a parliamentary committee investigating the question in 1926. Despite their best efforts, the parliamentarians in 1927 rejected their case and confirmed the McKenna-McBride recommendations. The aftermath of this phase of the land question in the province was a 1927 amendment of the Indian Act that serves as a fitting conclusion to the long period of attempted tutelage and control. The 1927 revision of the Act outlawed any organizing or raising/giving of funds for pursuing a Native land claim. This violation of freedom of association and of natural justice would remain part of the Indian Act until 1951, when, like modified involuntary enfranchisement and the prohibitions of Potlatching and prairie dancing, it was repealed.

As the extraordinary legislation of 1927 illustrates, in the half-century after Confederation policy moved steadily in the direction of increasing interference, attempted political control, and coercive efforts to transform Native peoples culturally and economically. The few initiatives attempted in the period, such as western treaty-making, were inadequately implemented, and government often persisted with them, as in the north, in spite of their obvious shortcomings. Policy in the prairie region, especially during the "peasant farming" phase, produced little economic benefit and soon became linked with oppressive controls such as the permit and pass systems. Educational policy was as much about cultural change as pedagogy, and its implementation in residential institutions caused a great deal of harm. Particularly after 1885, government officials increased their coercion and interference. Policies directed at Métis represented an exception, an aberration really, to this generalization. For a time in the 1890s and early 1900s, missionaries tried to promote Métis colonies, particularly in what became the province of Alberta. Soon these initiatives, too, were diverted to the benefit of incoming non-Native settlers. In the 1930s, following recommendations of the Ewing Commission, Alberta would establish ten "colonies" for Métis, most of which have survived to this day. In the north between Confederation and the Great War, Canada's
principal objective was to avoid incurring obligations to the Aboriginal peoples until southerners began to covet their lands. Perhaps the clearest expression of this wilful neglect of northern peoples was Ottawa's attempt to shirk constitutional responsibility for the Inuit.

Both the consistent purpose and the changing mood of post-Confederation relations with the Aboriginal peoples were captured in descriptions provided by leading politicians over the years. The Indian Affairs Branch in 1871 explained that Ottawa wanted "to lead the Indian people by degrees to mingle with the white race in the ordinary avocations of life." By 1887, an impatient Prime Minister John A. Macdonald put it more bluntly: "The great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the inhabitants of the Dominion, as speedily as they are fit for the change." By 1920, the Deputy Minister was even more brutally frank. "I want to get rid of the Indian problem," D.C. Scott told a parliamentary committee. "Our object 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."

In the half-century after Scott's statement, the Aboriginal communities of Canada would begin to rise, organize, and resist the oppressive and assimilative treatment most of them had experienced since Confederation.
Suggestions for Further Reading


Next to general accounts the most useful sources are regional overviews. Regional surveys that provide excellent coverage of Aboriginal issues are Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: UTP, 1991) and Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: UTP, 1984). Within the theme of Native and non-Native relations the best regional treatments are Ken S. Coates, “Best Left as Indians”: *Native-White Relations in the Yukon Territory, 1840-1973* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press [MQUP], 1991) and Kerry Abel, *Drum Songs: Glimpses of Dene History* (Montreal: MQUP, 1993). For British Columbia only see the latter chapters of Robin Fisher’s *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia 1774-1890*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver: UBCP, 1992; 1st ed., 1977) cover the post-1867 period, but some of his themes are continued by Paul Tennant in *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia 1849-1989* (Vancouver: UBCP, 1990). Unfortunately, central and Atlantic regions are not as well covered as the west and the north. However, an interesting starting point is Ruth Holmes Whitehead’s *The Old Man Told Us: Excerpts from Micmac History 1500-1950* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1991), and there are insights amidst the polemic in Daniel N. Paul, *We Were Not*
