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The “Indian Problem”: Isolation, Assimilation, and Experimentation

Chapter Outline

This chapter demonstrates the change in philosophy that would develop after the conclusion of the War of 1812 and the fact that Indigenous Peoples ceased to be viewed as allies. Covering the time period of the 1830s–1850s, this chapter examines the piecemeal approach that the British took towards ‘Indian’ policy and the role that assimilation was to play in this policy. A number of themes dominated British views on indigenous peoples during this time frame, including the belief that Indigenous Peoples were a vanishing people. Further debate dealt with concerns on which strategies might best be instituted in dealing with those populations that would remain. Two competing solutions came to the forefront: assimilation and isolation.

One of the earliest attempts at policy implementation—and a method that continued to be used from time to time—was the creation of what were called model villages, typically controlled by missionaries. The idea behind these was to have indigenous communities conform to a model European-village lifestyle, with the end result being assimilation. Others saw attempts at assimilation as futile. Sir Francis Bond Head, the lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada from 1834–1838, argued that isolation was the key and that by fortifying Indigenous Peoples from all contact with whites, the indigenous way of life would eventually disappear. As one can see, the logic in this approach is seriously flawed as it is unlikely that people who were isolated would actually disappear.

Indian administration did not take a uniform model but changed as warranted. For example, in the Arctic, since no one except the Inuit was interested in permanent residence in the Arctic, the British more or less ignored that area, and non-Native intrusions were few and scattered until the 1900s, when an interest in whaling arose. On the east coast during the late 1700s and early 1800s, the Mi’kmaq lost lands to squatters, but by 1859, legislation was enacted that stipulated that profits from any lands purchased by squatters be paid to indigenous peoples. The problem was that few squatters ever paid for their lands or paid them in full. On the prairies, as the mid-1800s approached, the fur trade was beginning to show signs of decline, and it was becoming apparent that the buffalo herds were declining as well, setting the stage for a period of distress for indigenous populations. Some groups like the Ojibwa began to take up agriculture on their own initiative. Also, similar to the rise of other prophets in the east, the response to outside pressures and the presence and teachings of Europeans in the west, also saw the rise of a new prophet on the prairies. Abishabis was the leader of this religious movement, which blended Indigenous and Christian elements.

Finally, on the west coast, the administration of James Douglas attempted to deal with the land question based on the idea of ‘unequivocal recognition of Aboriginal title.’ He signed 14 treaties on Vancouver Island and undertook the survey of reserves at the approval of most First Nations. In

spite of Douglas's more favorable attempts at to work with First Nations, they had already suffered from considerable loss and disruption. The effects of these nineteenth century disruptions resulted in several divisions among Indigenous groups. During Douglas's tenure, there had also been tense relations with the eruption of violence, which initiated the practice of gunboat diplomacy. Finally, the retirement of Douglas would result in Joseph Trutch coming to administer Indian policy; Trutch did not believe in Indigenous rights to land and set out reducing reserve size for the benefit of settlers, actions which have left a continuing legacy of litigation.

Learning Objectives

- To understand how 'Indian' policy developed as a means of assimilation
- To recognize how Indian administration was carried out in a variety of fashions across British North America
- To understand the precedents that set policy during the 1840s and 1850s
- To recognize a few model villages and how they were established

Key Terms, Figures or Sites

Abishabis ("Small Eyes," d. 1843) Cree prophet of a millenarian religious movement that swept through northern Manitoba and Ontario during the 1840s; murdered a First Nations family near York Factory, was arrested, and was murdered during his imprisonment (p. 179).

assimilation The process of being absorbed into the culture or customs of another group (p. 168).

Douglas, Sir James (1807–73) Governor of Vancouver Island (1851–63) and of British Columbia (1858–64), a man of mixed West Indian and Scottish heritage who was Chief Trader (1835–9) and then Chief Factor at Fort Vancouver, and who was responsible for 14 treaties (1850–4) granting Aboriginal title to Coast Salish bands on southern Vancouver Island (p. 179).

Duncan, William (1832–1918) Protestant lay missionary who, along with Tsimshian Chief Paul Le-gaic, founded the "model" Indigenous community of Metlakatla (1862–87). The community became increasingly totalitarian, and eventually, following a violent confrontation, Duncan led a break-away group to form New Metlakatla on Annette Island, Alaska (p. 174).

gunboat diplomacy Diplomacy backed by the use or threat of military force, specifically gunboats (p. 180).

Head, Sir Francis Bond (1783–1875) Soldier and colonial administrator who was lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada during the 1837 rebellion and arranged the surrender by the Ojibwa of the Saugeen ("mouth of the river") Tract on the Bruce Peninsula in 1836 (p. 171).

Kahkewaquonaby (Rev. Peter Jones, "Sacred Feathers," 1802–56) Mississauga-Welsh Métis and Methodist minister who advocated Indigenous control of their education system (p. 169).

Metlakatla Traditional Tsimshian settlement on the coast of what is now British Columbia, and site of an Anglican mission and model village, which lasted from 1862 to 1887 (p. 174).

Mikak (c. 1740–95) Labrador Inuk woman who assisted the Moravians in establishing their mission among the Inuit and who was involved in the Labrador coastal trade (p. 173).

model villages Settlements of Indigenous Peoples organized and administered by government officials or missionaries for the purpose of promoting Indigenous assimilation (p. 169).

Saugeen Tract Triangular area of 1.5 million acres (607,500 ha) on the western edge of Lake Huron adjacent to the Bruce Peninsula ceded to the federal government by the Saugeen Ojibwa nation in August 1836 in exchange for assistance to those who moved to the Bruce Peninsula (p. 171).

Study Questions

1. What were the main two ideas dominating British civil administration by 1830?
2. What was the purpose of model villages?
3. Who was Kahkewaquonaby (Peter Jones) and what did he fight for?
4. Who was Sir Francis Bond Head and what was his position on 'Indian' policy?
5. What was the Saugeen Tract and what was the outcome for the Ojibwa?
6. What was the impact of the Grand River Navigation Company's scheme on Haudenosaunee lands?
7. How did whaling activities impact the Inuit?
8. What policy did the British apply to Mi'kmaq lands?
9. What happened to squatters who infringed upon Mi'kmaq reserve lands?
10. What was it that kept First Nations from losing virtually all of their land in New Brunswick?
11. What circumstances led to the religious movement led by Abishabis?
12. Why did some prairie groups decide to take up agriculture?
13. What was James Douglas's 'Indian land' policy?
14. What is meant by "gunboat diplomacy"?
15. What was the cause of the Gitksan uprising?

Essay Questions

1. Briefly describe one model village, developed with the aim of assimilating the First Peoples. Outline the challenges associated with its establishment.

Credit River was established by Peter Jones, but the fact that he was Methodist instead of Anglican hindered its success. The people did not want to switch, and the British saw it as too American. The government refused the band's application for a deed (pp. 169-170). William Case ran into similar issues trying to establish a village on Grape Island in 1827. He ran the village like an army camp, and in 1836 it was moved to a more suitable location on Rice Lake (p.170).

Indigenous Peoples saw these initiatives as an opportunity for education, but the government saw it as a tool for assimilation (p. 171).

Other examples include Coldwater and the Narrows near Orillia (p. 170).

2. Discuss the general land policies of either New Brunswick, Nova Scotia or the Northwest Coast.

In Nova Scotia, the government recognized no territorial rights of Indigenous Peoples. Aside from the right to hunt and fish, the Mi'kmaq had to apply for land grants the same as everyone else. When they were granted licenses of occupation, the locations were not suitable, and none were near their traditional hunting grounds around Halifax (p. 174). Instead of being set aside for specific bands, reserved lands were for all Indigenous Peoples in the province; they were also continually invaded by non-Indigenous squatters (p. 175). In 1859, the government enacted legislation that allowed established squatters to pay for the land they had taken, but few paid anything, and none paid in full (p. 175). By 1866, the government determined that the boundaries of reserves were not to be disputed and there was a total of 20, 730 acres of land set aside for 637 families. However, few Mi'kmaq were farmers and they also objected to the individual leaseholds over that of their customary common land holding system (p. 177). In spite of special legislation to protect reserve lands was drafted in 1844, the only thing that had saved First Nations from losing all their land in New Brunswick was that much of it was unsuitable for agriculture (p. 178).

3. Who was Sir Francis Bond Head and what was his position with regards to assimilation strategies?

Sir Francis Bond Head was the lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada from 1836 to 1838. In his opinion, it was not likely that hunters would become farmers. He also believed that model villages created more vices. His belief was that the best solution was to remove Indigenous Peoples from all contact and communication with white people. To that end, he identified Manitoulin Island as a suitable refuge where Indigenous people could be "totally separated" from non-Indigenous peoples. He convinced some Ojibwa leaders to move their people and to sign over the islands in the Manitoulin chain in exchange for a promise that the government would protect the region as Indigenous territory (pp. 171-172).

Additional Resources

Further Readings

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- Upton, Leslie F.S. *Micmacs and Colonists: Indian-White Relations in the Maritimes, 1713–1867*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1979.

Websites

Historica Canada - Sir Francis Bond Head

- <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sir-francis-bond-head/>

Historica Canada - Sir James Douglas

- <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sir-james-douglas/>

Treaties and Historical Research Centre, Robert Surtees - Indigenous and Northern Affairs - Manitoulin Island Treaties

- <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100028959/1100100028961>