

A Historiography of Canadian Aboriginal Activism in the 20th Century

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Aboriginal activism in twentieth century Canada has occurred in sporadic starts and stops. The reason lies in the regional differences between native traditions, thereby affecting the importance attached to specific issues such as treaties, traditional hunting/fishing rights and the Indian Act. To lump all native groups together is a mistake, but, as will be shown, Aboriginal activism brought many groups together. The success or failure of advocacy movements in Canada rested on the degree to which individuals would agree on the issues to be advanced. Regional differences are the main reason why Aboriginal activism is still an issue: Specific arrangements between certain groups and the Canadian government still remain at odds with a national campaign for equal rights. In this paper, the scholarly debates between historians on the origins of Aboriginal activism will be discussed. Some academics argue that passive activism is worth exploring, while others track overt advocacy of native rights to the period of post-war veterans affairs following World War One. Other historians focus on the 1960s era of rebellion in which the Red Power movement plays an important, if sidelined analogy to global crisis. Finally, the decade of the 1990s set the stage of current activism in tone and language, creating the “Aboriginal” activism of the twenty-first century.

In order to understand why Aboriginal activism is mainly a product of the past sixty years, one must understand that not all Indians are born alike. In order to illustrate this point, an overview of two coastal groups will be compared and contrasted. On the east coast, the Mi'kmaq people experienced colonial settlement almost 150 years before the Haida of the western coast

did.¹ This large time gap has resulted in disparate relations with what would eventually become the Canadian government. A Mi'kmaq Indian inherently understands the differences between themselves and the Haida (and vice versa) but white scholars have, for generations, misunderstood this fact. In recent decades, white scholars have since been afraid to commit such a sin and therefore shy away from the history of Canada's Indians as a whole. This historiography aims to show that the new term 'Aboriginal' has broadened the scope of 'Indian' history which has managed to unite a dispersed group into a more cohesive unit.

At the time of Mi'kmaq contact with Europeans (French explorers) in the sixteenth century, "the people of the dawn" stretched from present day Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island to New Brunswick and Gaspè.² A rich oral tradition passed on a strong sense of spirituality and connectedness with nature. Those who held the knowledge of the past were highly regarded. Mi'kmaq culture is based on "a balance between coastal and inland harvesting" which anthropologists have been able to trace 2,500 years through the evidence of surviving artefacts.³

Socially, these maritime peoples arranged themselves in single-unit, loosely organized groups above which the Grand Council (Sante Mawlomi) resided. A Grand Chief then represented the Council in relations with other groups. This leader was chosen by the people due to distinguished service in peace and in war. Regional groupings were held together by feasts and celebrations. As previously mentioned, the Mi'kmaq were, and still are, spiritual people,

¹ George MacDonald, *Ninstints: Haida World Heritage Site*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia and Museum of Anthropology, 1983).

books1.scholarsportal.info.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/viewdoc.html?id=36138&page=9, 2.

*Initially, anthropologists were the academics trusted with bridging the gaps between Indians and white Canadians. This paper sought to represent the scholarly work on native history and so included anthropological history.

² Kenneth Coates, *The Marshall Decision and Native Rights*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 24.

³ Ibid.

connected to their beliefs through village shamans. Until Europeans arrived, the rivals of the Mi'kmaq were the Iroquois to the west.⁴

The arrival and settlement of the French brought new trade, disease and European wars to the Mi'kmaq. Despite the growing tension between these uneasy allies, the Mi'kmaq were drawn into wars against the British and the Iroquois. The struggle for North America depleted Mi'kmaq populations so thoroughly that after 150 years of struggle, a shaky peace treaty was signed in 1761, thereby subordinating Indian power to British rule for centuries to come.⁵

The importance of this 1761 peace treaty must be explained. The anthropologist Coates argues that the grievances that stemmed from this treaty would endure for centuries. In terms of twentieth century activism, this peace treaty would be condemned as “it is not clear whether the English or the Mi'kmaq possessed the language skills needed to communicate their intentions or their terms clearly.”⁶ This created a base for Mi'kmaq grievances that would differ from the Haida on the other side of the continent.

In contrast, the Haida occupied what would become the Queen Charlotte Islands of British Columbia. Early contact brought New England settlers to Haida shores around the year 1787. At this time, the Haida were said to number approximately six thousand but by 1880 their villages would be completely deserted.⁷ The Haida were a diverse people, separated by geography and distinct dialects: The Kunghit, Skidegate, Masset and Kaigani.⁸ The Kunghit speakers had two dozen permanent villages and smaller camps which were occupied seasonally. The population of these smaller villages ranged from 200-500 people and “usually included families from different lineages of the Ravens and Eagles, clans which were used to regulate

⁴ Coates, *The Marshall Decision and Native Rights*, 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷ MacDonal, *Ninstints: Haida World Heritage Site*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*

intermarriage and succession of rights and property.”⁹ The villages themselves controlled salmon breeding grounds and territory sufficient for hunting and gathering. Oral traditions also prevailed here and a spiritual connection to the Earth was a cornerstone to Haida culture.

Hostilities between colonizers and the Haida eventually began over trade imbalances. With the fur trade dwindling and deaths from European diseases increasing, the Haida fell victim to eviction from their traditional lands. By 1875 only a smattering of people occupied the villages of the coast and “the houses and monuments fell into ruins.”¹⁰

The difference between these two groups is the existence of a peace treaty. Both of these groups, the Mi’kmaq and Haida, lived in similar conditions but their experiences with white culture differed greatly. Whereas the Mi’kmaq passed on the tradition of a ‘peace treaty,’ the Haida were forced under the umbrella of the Indian Act which would go on to secure traditional fishing and hunting rights. Coming from two different histories ensured that the Haida and Mi’kmaq found it difficult to relate to one another. However, as will be shown, the similarities inherent in their cultures as well as the blunders of the Canadian government would be enough to bring these different people together under the banner of Aboriginal activism in the twentieth century.

At the turn of the twentieth-century, the relationship between natives and whites was no more amicable than the early settler period. In his book, *What is the ‘Indian Problem,’* Noel Dyck attempts to dissect the misunderstandings between whites and natives in Canada from a twentieth-century standpoint. According to this scholar, the twentieth-century understanding of natives by Europeans was “a shared belief that Indians are the cause of their own misfortune

⁹ MacDonald, *Ninstints*, 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

because they have not assimilated themselves into Canadian society.”¹¹ Discussions between whites and natives have stalled many times because historical responsibility is the main issue at hand. This uncomfortable realization contributes to the overall sensitivity academics apply to the study of native history. Furthermore, Noel Dyck’s major contribution to the discussion on the rise of Aboriginal activism is this: “The tutelage that Canadian Indians have experienced has been based neither upon a contractual agreement nor a negotiated understanding but upon the power of one side to regulate the behaviour of the other in accordance with a set of unilaterally selected purposes.”¹²

What Indian Affairs administrators failed to realize in the early twentieth century was that the ‘Indian problem’ was not an inherent condition, but an underlying premise of a relationship. On the flip side, this inherent knowledge on behalf of Indians contributed to what can be accurately described as passive resistance. Dyck goes further in explaining the rise of activism by illustrating the lifelong message of assimilation that the Canadian government created under the guise of the Indian Act. Based on the passages of the Indian Act, Dyck explains that the government agency created a situation in which natives were encouraged “to become worthwhile as individuals [by changing] the particular manner advocated by their tutelage agents.”¹³ The simple refusal to adhere to the outlined manner of living was a sign that Indians resisted the tutelage of government policies, despite force, poverty and societal marginalization. The very fact that Indians as a group existed into the twentieth century is the first form of resistance.

¹¹ Noel Dyck, *What is the ‘Indian Problem’: Tutelage and Resistance in Canadian Indian Administration*, (St. John’s: Memorial University Press, 1991), 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

The first form of overt Indian activism discussed in scholarship is identified as occurring after The Great War. Timothy Wineguard, among others, traces Aboriginal activism in the twentieth century to the issues surrounding Indian veterans. At the beginning of World War One, Indians were not actively recruited into the military due to their deprivation of the franchise. As wards of the Crown, Indians were not expected to join a European war. However, when recruitment of Indians opened up in late 1915, battalions arrived to recruit Indians despite previous concerns surrounding the legality of such actions.¹⁴ As can be expected, Indian communities responded differently to the call-to-arms. Ontario and Quebec were the main contributors of Indian soldiers. In the end, members of the Blackfoot Confederacy, Cree, Ojibway, Iroquois, Sioux, Delaware and Mi'kmaq signed on to contribute to the action at the front.¹⁵ Canadians of European descent applauded these brave and patriotic men as white volunteers became harder and harder to find. During the war many believed that this show of solidarity would translate into a post-war move away from French, British, Indian identities to become "Canadians pure and simple."¹⁶ This was not the case. Crown appropriation of Indian lands continued unabated and Indian participation in Europe did nothing to mitigate the negative effects of the Indian Act such as out-marriage* for women.

In the post-war period, Indian veterans found that they were not eligible for the same programs as whites unless they left their reserves permanently. Native peoples had "substantiated fears of losing their Indian status and the attached rights guaranteed by treaty and government obligations."¹⁷ To onlookers, this lack of consideration was wholly unfair, resulting in a show of

¹⁴ Timothy Wineguard, *For King and Kanata: Canadian Indians and the First World War*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 83. *out-marriage, the taking of status rights from native women and her children if she was to marry off a reserve, legally binding as a section of the Indian Act.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

solidarity behind veterans, in general, and for the first time, behind Indians. Petitions to the government were circulated, demanding the immediate cease of Crown appropriation of land. In response, the government pointed out the fact that enfranchised Indians saw veteran compensation. However, by 1921, only 227 Indians had agreed to forgo their rights under the Indian Act and live off reserve. All the Indians who opted for enfranchisement were from Ontario with 212 from the Six Nations reserve.¹⁸ Passive resistance, referred to by Noel Dyck, continued but “Indian veterans were instrumental in the creation of the first nationwide Indian political organization — The League of Indians of Canada.”¹⁹ This League denounced residential schools, inequality between natives and whites, and called for a Canadian-British political forum. The principles of self-determination began to show up in dialogue, uniting Indians across Canada for the first time. Subsequently, the Indian Association of Alberta and the Union of Saskatchewan Indians were created, as the regional differences were still prevalent between various groups and a national organization was too large to accommodate all interests at this time. Although there were few initial benefits, this period set precedents for Indian assemblies “and it showed Indian Affairs that Indians had the education, motivation and aptitude to challenge government policies.”²⁰

In 1977, Harold Cardinal articulated the long history of passive resistance by his people, the Cree, to whites just ‘discovering’ Indians in Canada. Cardinal stated that misunderstandings between various groups stemmed from the fact “that there never have been any precise translations between the Indian and white languages,” an issue that underlies the ‘Canadian’ identity crisis of the 1960s.²¹ Prior to the inspiration of developing-world struggles against

¹⁸ Wineguard, *For King and Kanata*, 158.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 165.

²¹ Harold Cardinal, *The Rebirth of Canada's Indians*, (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1977), 11.

colonial power in the sixties, native people misunderstood the adversarial nature of Crown control. With the introduction of the White Paper in 1969, Indians were able to easily identify their adversary and political organization became much easier. According to Cardinal, the idea that treaties were “of friendship, a kind of partnership” was not challenged by Indians until the 1940s.²² Up until this point, most believed that the Queen herself was in control on the European side while natives were governed by unwritten laws passed down verbally from generation to generation. Cardinal explains that “it was difficult for our people to conceive of a society that wrote laws that governed the way things *should* operate.”²³ Additionally, Cardinal explains the splintering of various groups in the post-war period as part of the fear that government would terminate its relationship with Indian people—a fear that was realized in 1969. Finally, the most important factor negatively affecting political organization was intense poverty of Indians across Canada; “our people were so poor that they are cutting right to the bone for pure survival.”²⁴

The next stage of Aboriginal activism is the well-studied period of the 1960s, labelled Red Power. Scholar Bryan Palmer covers Red Power (in one full chapter) of his cumulative book *The 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era*. Although Palmer’s main thesis revolves around Canadian identity on the whole, he asserts that “after the stagnate 1950s, Indians in Canada came to see their struggles against colonialism, one that linked them to upheavals of peoples of colour around the world.”²⁵ He views the sixties as an era of youthful assertion of native rights that mimicked civil rights movements in the United States. This tumultuous era saw the creation of the Ontario Grand Indian Council, British Columbia’s Native Brotherhood, the

²² Cardinal, *The Rebirth of Canada’s Indians*, 92.

²³ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁵ Bryan Palmer, *1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 377.

North American Brotherhood as well as the rebirth of Metis organizations in Alberta.²⁶ Distinct leaders (such as Harold Cardinal) rose to prominence, prepared to advocate for all Indians of Canada.

Gone were the days of circulated petitions. These paper promises were to be replaced by a radical youth movement in response to failed attempts of the federal government to solve the 'Indian problem' with the White Paper, 1969. A renewed call for self-determination was articulated as well as "championing government assisted development of Indian business or 'red capitalism'."²⁷ The Red Paper was the most important legacy of the 1960s as it was a point-by-point rebuttal to the White Paper. The proposal included a resolution of "the 'Indian problem' through dialogue, reform, [and] state commitment to lift deplorable reserve conditions." These resolutions were adopted by the National Brotherhood of Indians and presented to the Prime Minister on behalf of all Indian interests in Canada.²⁸ A further legacy was the creation of the Native Women's Association and the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada — two groups which had not previously been represented nationally. Subsequently, the practice of out-marriage was abolished by the Supreme Court of Canada in 1973.²⁹ Government programs to increase political organization, self-determination and post-secondary education of natives took root in this period.

According to legal scholar, John Borrows, the 1960s changed the relationship between white Canadians and Indians. This change came about because the conception that colonization was "not a strong place to rest the foundations of Canada's laws" was accepted by academics and legal experts.³⁰ The underlying tensions, which have been discussed previously, began to gain public attention due to the legacy of the 1960s. Borrows supports this claim by examining the

²⁶ Palmer, *1960s*, 377.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 405.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 407.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 403.

³⁰ John Borrows, *Canada's Indigenous Constitution*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 14.

ramifications of the context of treaty-making in the colonial period: English settlers adhered to native traditions when negotiating. Furthermore, there was no “formal extinguished rights of Indians in Canada by discovery, occupation, prescription or conquest therefore native rights can be viewed as retaining their force.”³¹ Borrows goes on to say that, if anything, treaties made with natives should be legally examined as the “inter-societal framework in which first laws intermingle with imperial laws to foster peace and order across communities.”³² This change in Euro-centric thinking is what made Aboriginal activism of the 1990s possible.

The third and final period of twentieth-century Aboriginal activism occurred in the decade of the 1990s — a result of increased participation in new political organization and an increased presence in post-secondary institutions by native youth across Canada. Alan Cairns documents that the “language of nationalism was widespread” whereas prior to the 1960s, there had previously been a struggle to gain equal footing with white Canadians.³³ Cairns labels the 1960s as the period of ‘Citizens Plus’—an attempt by natives to be considered equal with additional privileges. The movement towards nation-to-nation negotiations with the Canadian government were cemented in the *Constitution Act, 1982* as ‘Aboriginal’ rights became entrenched. The key word is ‘Aboriginal’ rights, as have been referred to throughout this paper. This development is significant because Indian, non-Indian, Metis, off-reserve, on-reserve, Inuit and others were officially amalgamated into one cohesive group: Aboriginal. This sparked an interest in legal professions because a new jurisdiction was created.³⁴ However, a paradox was created:

³¹ Borrows, *Canada's Indigenous Constitution*, 21.

³² Ibid.

³³ Alan Cairns, *Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000), 169.

³⁴ Ibid., 70.

The reality, which the composition of Parliament conceals, is that the recognition of Aboriginal organizations as advocates of their peoples is both because of the limited overt presence of indigenous Canadians in Parliament and their status as voting citizens, which symbolizes their inclusion. Status Indians did not bargain nation-to-nation when they lacked the franchise.³⁵

Cairns put forth the idea that parliamentary representation of Indians in the federal government is a result of the small Aboriginal population and is filled by native organizations. Natives are still stuck between Canadian society and Aboriginal organizations. This is the main issue that exists within the Aboriginal community.³⁶

Writing about Aboriginal history is difficult to do. Most of this difficulty stems from centuries of oppression and marginalization by the ever-present Canadian government. Guilt, poverty, and fear rule the discussions of Aboriginal history and activism. To write about Aboriginal history is a lesson in treading lightly; however, it is about time that historians are able to objectively examine the evidence and dedicate entire books to Aboriginal activism in its entirety. At this point in time, Aboriginal activism is examined as an anomaly, in reaction to major events such as Quebec separatism or the civil rights movements in the United States or worse, in response to government blundering. This sidelining of native history is unfair and creates an incomplete picture of what it means to be Aboriginal. Alan Cairns attributed one failure of the post 1960s activism to the “absence of an Aboriginal Trudeau on the federal side, capable of authoritatively representing and speaking for the Canadian dimension of Aboriginality.”³⁷ The paradox of dual-representation of natives is incomplete and unhelpful if there is no authority capable of sparring with the Canadian government in an official capacity. Cairns goes on to speculate, in 1998, that in the following twenty years, the overall population of Canada’s indigenous people would grow, adapt to urban life and seek out increased levels of

³⁵ Cairns, *Citizens Plus*, 172

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

post-secondary education “to the extent that their careers and lifestyles are satisfactory, they may become defenders of the society they have joined. At that time, an Aboriginal counterpart to Trudeau may emerge,” capable of representing Indian-Canadian citizens.³⁸ Perhaps Cairns is correct in speculating the future of Aboriginal activism. If this overview of Aboriginal activism seems incomplete, it is. The scholarship on Aboriginal activism is wanting. Furthermore, Aboriginal activism as a physical action is incomplete, despite gains made in the post-war period, the 1960s and the 1990s. The underlying misunderstandings discussed above still exist today because Canadian academics relegate native history to the margins by insisting that ‘someone else’ is more qualified to comment on these sensitive topics. Each Canadian has the right to know about Aboriginal activism in order to learn what it truly means to live in this country: white, Indian and everyone in between.

³⁸ Cairns, *Citizens Plus*, 173.

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