11.4: 11.1:3 Summary

Figure 11.22 Members of the Alkali Lake Braves hockey team in Vancouver, 1932. A few years later liquor became available to the Esketemc and an alcoholism epidemic was underway. The band’s collective recovery began in the 1970s and has become legendary, although recovery from cultural genocide, abuses in schools, and on-reserve poverty continues to be a work in progress.

The thrust of Canadian policy as regards Aboriginal people was, from 1867 on, assimilation. John A. Macdonald said
that "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."[1] There were several obstacles to this project, one of which was the racism deeply embedded in Canadian society and laws that implied that Indians would never be "fit" for inclusion. Another obstacle was the resistance mounted by Aboriginal peoples to assimilationist institutions and laws.

To be sure, Canadian efforts on this front were also clumsy and largely ineffectual. Decades of promoting the benefits of relinquishing Indian Status and joining Canadian society resulted in only 250 Aboriginal people taking up the offer of enfranchisement by 1920. Despite the menacing look of the laws against the potlatch and the sun dance, they were feebly enforced (with a few notable exceptions), as was the pass system.[2] Residential schools were much more efficient at crippling family relations and damaging childhoods than they were at producing new “Canadians” ready to join the mainstream economy. Leaving the business of education in the hands of parsimonious missionary religious orders meant that the absence of traditional cultural practices would not be replaced with an education of comparable value. Aboriginal parents and communities who had hoped for relevant training to prepare their children for a world with narrower resources and newly established economic structures would be disappointed. Children themselves resisted the sham of industrial and residential schools by running away, committing acts of vandalism and arson, and by being uncooperative.

The circumstances faced by Aboriginal peoples after 1867 varied by place and over time. The Métis diaspora — or at least some of it — was, culturally speaking, in a better position to integrate into the emergent Canadian systems of land ownership, commerce, and knowledge. But at the same time, the Métis lacked any kind of homeland comparable to the reserves that provided First Nations with a base of operations. However, these reserves offered little in the way of guaranteed community prosperity. This was especially the case among relocated communities in the sub-Arctic and Arctic, Nova Scotia, the Kootenays, and along the Great Lakes (to name only a few locations where people were shunted about to make way for efficiencies, the military, hydroelectricity, and mines). Nothing flags poor conditions on reserves and across the North as much as the ubiquity of tuberculosis in Aboriginal communities — TB is a symptom of poverty, inadequate housing, and poor diets. Colonial-era changes in traditional food supplies were coupled to immediate and general environmental degradation to produce conditions that favoured tuberculosis. The fact that Aboriginal populations recovered in impressive numbers in the face of these grim environmental circumstances begs the question: What would the demographic curve look like if Aboriginal peoples from the 1920s to the 1980s had enjoyed better housing, water, food, schools, and incomes, and less TB?

Dealing with TB required the further bureaucratization and institutionalization of Aboriginal life. “Indian hospitals” joined a long list of systems that measured, monitored, rationalized, and individualized Native people. At the same time, these modernist institutions — schools, courts, prisons, hospitals, and Indian Affairs — had to identify “Indian-ness” to fulfill their task of expunging it. Treating all Aboriginal people as one was a kind of pan-Indian approach that, along the way, made it possible for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis to find common ground and to build the foundations of a response.

Whatever the shortcomings of the colonialist experience, Aboriginal leaders could nonetheless play the role of magpies, keeping their eyes sharp for the few shiny opportunities that became available. They found useful tools for building up band offices, commercial enterprises, and social programs. The Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc (formerly the Kamloops Indian Band) exemplifies the ways in which First Nations people exploited Canadian assimilationist policies to fashion an effective hybrid culture of entrepreneurship based on principles of band ownership. Several of the Niitsitapi bands enjoy
significant advantages arising from their oil-rich reserve lands. The Wei Wai Kum and We Wai Kai of Campbell River and Cape Mudge have utilized other models of economic advancement through commercial development and **aboriginal tourism**. Each of these experiments began in earnest in the 1980s, and each has leveraged economic success to build cultural and linguistic recovery. It is trite to say that not every experiment has met with victory and that many have faced criticism from within and without individual bands; of course, that is the case. Failure, regrouping, and further trial and error is in the nature of experimentation.

It would be even more trite to suggest that the success of a few bands negates the fact that most Aboriginal people continue to live in poverty. A disproportionate number are incarcerated, and violence, abuse, suicide, and homicide are a reality of Aboriginal lives much more so than for non-Aboriginals. Racism has not gone away; it remains a lived experience. One consequence of events since 1970, however, has been the emergence of a cadre of Aboriginal leaders — many of them highly educated and quite a few of them women — whose prominence in government, the arts, media, and commerce are impossible to miss. It is not the business of history to suggest where this may go, nor are historians especially concerned with where we are right now. However, an exploration of the experience of Aboriginal peoples in the past points to themes — the continuing exploration of the relevance of treaties and mutual sovereignty, the necessity of dialogue, the many acts of resistance mounted by native people against colonialism, and the persistence of dramatic inequalities in a country that ostensibly places a high value on humanism — that have contributed to the energy and success of both Idle No More and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The current context of that story — the post-Cold War, post-colonial, and postmodern world — is examined in the next chapter.

![Figure 11.23 Jody Wilson-Raybould](commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=43120708)

**Figure 11.23 Jody Wilson-Raybould (b. 1971) is a Kwakwaka-wakw politician from Comox who was elected in the riding of Vancouver Granville in 2015. She is currently the Federal Minister of Justice — the first Aboriginal person to hold that position.**

**Key Terms**

**Aboriginal rights**: Defined in two ways: 1) as an abstract set of inherent and collective rights available on principle only
to Aboriginal peoples, which may include land, resource and treaty rights; 2) also or alternately, cultural rights associated with traditional or customary practices that are thought to predate European contact. The latter are protected in the *Constitution Act, 1982*.

**Aboriginal tourism:** Usually associated with cultural displays and/or performances, sometimes with Aboriginal lifestyle experiences. The sector was very small in the 1990s, but since has become an annual multi-million dollar industry.

**Assembly of First Nations (AFN):** The successor to the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB); the AFN, a national advocacy organization that represents Aboriginal peoples, was established in 1982.

**band offices:** The administrative centre of a First Nation band; a unit of government within the First Nation; applies principally to populations covered by the *Indian Act* (that is, Status Indians). The band council is the decision-making assembly in the band office.

**Burnt Church Crisis:** Between 1999 and 2002, a confrontation between the Burnt Church First Nation (a Mi’kmaq community in New Brunswick) and non-Aboriginal fishers and the Federal Department of Fisheries.

**Calder Case:** Supreme Court case (Calder v British Columbia) in 1973 that decided that Aboriginal title existed prior to colonization and persisted after 1871.

**Criminal Code:** Properly, an Act respecting the criminal law; the *Criminal Code* is a regularly amended body of legislation pertaining to criminal — as opposed to civil or statute — law.

**cultural genocide:** Premeditated and systematic attempts to eliminate a culture while not necessarily exterminating the population.

**Delgamuukw v British Columbia:** 1997 landmark decision in the Supreme Court of Canada; established a test for the existence of Aboriginal title, extended title beyond evidence of past use to include custodianship of territory, and thus includes a cultural relationship — rather than simply an economic relationship — with the land.

**Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development:** Created in 1966, a successor administrative unit to the Department of Indian Affairs (D.I.A.).

**Department of Indian Affairs (DIA):** Established in 1888 to administer the Federal Government’s responsibilities as regards First Nations; was housed for many years under the office of the Minister of the Interior (who was also responsible for settling the West with immigrants).

**Douglas Treaties:** Negotiated by Governor James Douglas of Vancouver Island in the colonial era and concluded with 14 First Nations in the colony in the early 1850s; apart from Treaty No.8 in the Peace District, the only treaties in British Columbia before the late 20th century.

**Fourth World:** A category of mostly small and colonized indigenous populations around the globe; juxtaposed with First (northwestern European and North American), Second (Soviet bloc of developed nations), and Third (developing) Worlds; formalized with the establishment of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples led by George Manuel in the mid-1970s.
Idle No More: A peaceful protest and awareness-raising movement launched in 2012 by a group of Aboriginal and allies; catalyzed by Federal Government legislation that threatened Treaty rights.

Mohawk Institute: First industrial school for Aboriginal people, principally Mohawk; taught basic academic instruction and trades; based in Brantford, Ontario; opened in the 1830s under the auspices of the New England Company.

nadir: The opposite of zenith; it is the trough, and in demographic terms, it means the point at which a falling population bottoms out and from which it recovers. In the case of First Nations populations, they continued to fall until the 1920s at which point they began a steady recovery.


numbered treaties: Treaties struck between Canada and Aboriginal peoples from 1871 (Treaty 1) to 1921 (Treaty 11), covering a territory that stretches from Ontario’s eastern boundary in the North West to British Columbia, incorporating the whole of the Peace River Valley and the Mackenzie River drainage basin. Areas not covered by numbered treaties include southern Ontario (including the Rainy River area and Thunder Bay-Nippissing corridor), most of British Columbia, most of the Yukon and North West Territories, and all of Quebec, the Maritimes, and Newfoundland-Labrador.

Oka Crisis: In 1990 armed Mohawk band members from Kanesatake blockaded access to the proposed construction site of a golf course in Oka; the arrival of Canadian Armed Forces troops was followed by disruptions of traffic through reserve lands to the south by Mohawk band members from Kahnawake.

pass system: Aboriginal reserve residents were required to secure a pass from their Indian agent in order to leave the reserve.

Penner Report: Recommended to Ottawa in 1983 that Aboriginal peoples constitute a distinct order of government and ought to be recognized as such.

post-colonial, post-colonialism: The range of experiences and perspectives that look beyond the paradigm of colonial society and colonialism; associated with the late 20th century.

potlatch: Refers to ceremonies associated with First Nations cultures on the Pacific Northwest Coast.


Red Power: A continent-wide movement led by Aboriginal peoples in the late 1960s and through the 1970s to place Aboriginal issues on the political agenda.

Royal Proclamation: 1763; Britain’s first constitution for post-Conquest Canada; recognized inherent Indigenous land tenure rights or Aboriginal title to the land, making it impossible for any authority or individual other than the Crown to alienate Aboriginal title; provoked objections among the American colonists because it interfered with their plans for westward expansion; sometimes called the Indian Magna Carta.
Section 35: Of the Constitution Act, 1982; recognizes and affirms Aboriginal rights.

sixties scoop: The apprehension and removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities by provincial child welfare authorities during the 1960s.


tuberculosis (TB): An epidemic associated with rapid urbanization, tenement housing, slums, and poverty; spread rapidly in the post-Confederation period, becoming epidemic among Aboriginal populations; tuberculosis sanatoria were established and operating across Canada until the 1960s, by which time antibiotics (especially Streptomycin) had severely reduced the incidence and morbidity associated with TB.


vagrancy: The state of being without work or employment, homelessness, and (often) transience; associated with poverty and begging. Vagrancy was treated as a crime and was listed in the Criminal Code until 1972. The 21st century has seen the return of anti-vagrancy laws with different names.

wheat pools: Typically cooperatives made up of grain growers who combined (pooled) their output — and risk — to reduce competition and overheads while securing the best price; replaced temporarily by the Canadian Wheat Board in 1935; competed against private grain elevators in the post-war era.

White Paper: Also known as The Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy, 1969; proposed the dismantling of the Indian Act, an effective end to Indian Status, and the conversion of reserve land to private property; introduced by the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau and led by the Minister of Justice, Jean Chrétien; met with strident opposition from Aboriginal leaders, part of which took the form of the Red Paper.

Short Answer Exercises

1. In what ways did the Euro-Canadian colonization of Canada reduce the ability of Aboriginal people to thrive?
2. What were the principal demographic forces governing Aboriginal populations in the post-Confederation era?
3. What principles and rights did Aboriginal peoples believe they enjoyed at the time of Confederation? How, why, and to what extent were these removed in the decades that followed?
4. How did the relationship between Canada and Aboriginal peoples change in the years from 1876 to the early 20th century?
5. What purposes lay behind the Numbered Treaties and schools? Consider both the Aboriginal people’s goals and those of the Canadians.
6. Why did Canada attempt to dissolve the Indian Act in 1969 and what was the consequence of that initiative?
7. Why did Aboriginal resistance increasingly take the form of court challenges and extra-legal protests?
8. What was impact of the residential school experiment?
9. What is the historic context of Idle No More and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?
Suggested Readings


Attributions

Figure 11.22
CVA 99-4112 – Indian Hockey Team [from] Alkali Lake by Stewart Thompson / City of Vancouver Archives (AM1535-: CVA 99-4112) is in the public domain.

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2. ibid., 190-194. ↩

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