11.8: Aboriginal – Newcomer Relations before Confederation

Relations between the Crown and Indigenous peoples in what is now Canada began hundreds of years ago and have been affected by both internal and external forces. These interactions have changed over time and continue to evolve today. While there were periods in which some have deemed the association a partnership, more often it has been exchanges that were largely characterized by myopic policies and actions by the British, and later Canadian federal government; a lack of consultation; and an absence of consent by Indigenous peoples — in short, Canada is built on colonialist foundations. Some, such as the recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission, have even described the government’s policies for Indigenous peoples as cultural genocide.[1] In the words of historian Susan Neylan:

…most Canadians have trouble regarding themselves as living in an Aboriginal nation or seeing how historical legacies have relevance for contemporary identities. However, scholars of Aboriginal History are well aware of how Canada was founded upon acts of resettlement and dispossession. The erasure of its original inhabitants and their histories is the byproduct of a persistent “settler myth” that views Aboriginal peoples as obstacles to, or in the least, passive players in the “real” history of non-Indigenous peoples, who are presumed to have dealt peacefully and benevolently with those Aboriginal societies.[2]

This section and the three that follow trace the history of these dealings of the British and Canadian government with Indigenous peoples from just prior to Confederation up until and including more recent events such as political activism, land claims, confrontations such as Oka, and new movements such as Idle No More.

Economic and Military Allies

Historians such as J. R. Miller have described early interactions between Aboriginal peoples and non-Indigenous newcomers as an “era of cooperation” in which reciprocal relationships existed.[3] These contacts began hundreds of
years ago when Europeans began to travel to North America in search of resources such as fish and timber. Soon they discovered that furs, in particular beaver, was a profitable commodity. While the extent to which Indigenous groups became involved in the fur trade varied, many willingly and readily became “partners in furs,” since they too saw various benefits to being involved in the trade. However, in these early years, the British and French clashed over control of the trade and other events external to North America. Before long, Indigenous peoples were drawn into various battles and were also encouraging the British and French to join with them as allies in their own conflicts.

Cognizant of the value and importance of military alliances with Indigenous peoples, in 1755, the British government established the British Indian Department, which was divided into two parts: a Northern Department under Sir William Johnson (1715-1774) who was named Superintendent of Indian Affairs, and a second department that was to manage affairs with Indigenous peoples farther south. Both departments were under the jurisdiction of the Commander of the British Forces in North America. Shortly after the creation of the Indian Department, the Seven Years’ War broke out in which rivals Britain and France fought for control not only of what would become the country of Canada, but beyond on a global scale. The main goal of the Indian Department during these battles was to ensure that various Indigenous groups were allies, or at the very least remained neutral. In the end, the British would gain control of Canada from the French, and Indigenous peoples would officially fall under British imperial authority.

The Royal Proclamation

In 1763 shortly after the end of the Seven Years’ War, the British passed the Royal Proclamation that set aside a large territory west of the British-American Thirteen Colonies and that more importantly, also recognized inherent Indigenous land tenure rights or Aboriginal title to the land. The Proclamation set out a fiduciary or protector relationship in which the Crown would act as a trustee who would supposedly act in the best interests of Indigenous peoples, overseeing the policy that Aboriginal title could be extinguished only by treaty with the Crown. The Royal Proclamation also promised that Indigenous peoples would “not be molested or disturbed.” Alongside these changes, the Indian Department grew in size and complexity, in part, because of the failure of the Royal Proclamation to keep colonists off Indigenous lands, but primarily due to a series of other battles including the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783). Thus, the main goal of the British government remained to maintain Indigenous peoples as allies.

The “Indian Problem” and Early Government and Church Solutions

The end of the War of 1812 (1812-1815) initiated a new era of relations with Indigenous peoples. As the threat of future North American wars retreated, increasingly, Indigenous peoples were seen as a “problem.” This situation was exacerbated by the decline of the fur trade in some areas, growing demand for Indigenous land by settlers, and increasing costs of supplying presents to First Nations groups to ensure their loyalty. With costs rising and returns dwindling, the British government sought a new direction for their interactions with Indigenous peoples. Thus, in 1829 under Major General H.C. Darling, Superintendent of Indians, a new plan was proposed that would supposedly address the “Indian problem.”

Darling proposed a plan to “civilize” Indigenous peoples by assimilating them into Euro-Canadian society. This plan would shape Canadian Indian administration thinking for many years. Whether or not this plan was assimilation or genocide has been debated, although assimilation did become a justification in Canada for colonialism. The plan to
civilize and protect Indigenous peoples resulted in significant changes to the Indian Department in 1830, including moving control of the Department from the military to the civil arm of government. This new “civilization” plan sought to turn Indigenous peoples into self-sufficient Christian farmers who would integrate into settler society and no longer be a costly expense for the government. To keep up with the economic, technological, and social changes in the Canada, Indigenous peoples were to be converted to Christianity; taught to practice a trade (usually farming); and educated on how to live, act, and dress as Euro-Canadians. As a result, model farming communities such as the one at the Coldwater Narrows reserve near Lake Simcoe were built. In addition, treaties moved from a model of largely peace and friendship to treaties whose goal was land cession in which First Nations peoples would be placed on reserves. The government argued that this was for the protection of Indigenous peoples until they could assimilate or until they disappeared completely (what many at the time saw as an inevitability). It also, of course, helped clear the path for non-Indigenous settlement.

Figure 11.5 The Mohawk Institute and Farm at Brantford, 1917.

Government officials felt it would be best to begin “civilizing” at an early age, which would take place in schools in which children would be removed from the influences of their parents. While day schools existed, there was not yet a manual labour or industrial school system in place in which students would receive basic academic instruction and also be taught a trade. Soon, the first of these industrial schools, the Mohawk Institute, opened in Brantford, Ontario in the 1830s under the auspices of the New England Company. While there would be an initial outlay to construct and maintain the schools, these costs were borne largely by the churches, and it was assumed that assimilation would happen quickly. Some officials such as Lieutenant-Governor Sir Francis Bond Head (1793-1875), however, argued in the mid-1830s that any attempts to assimilate Indigenous peoples were folly and that the Indigenous peoples of what is now Ontario should be gathered up and moved to Manitoulin Island. Bond Head’s plan failed to gain support, and the government forged ahead with Darling’s civilization plan instead.

From the 1830s to the 1850s, the British government also undertook a number of investigations into Aboriginal affairs in the newly created united Province of Canada. As was the case up to this point, these inquiries were made without any consultation with Indigenous peoples. One of the earliest of these studies, the Bagot Commission, reported in 1844, argued that changes needed to be made to a number of areas including the management of Indigenous land. A number of Acts followed, including the Gradual Civilization Act (1857), which promoted voluntary enfranchisement and the gradual dissolution of reserve lands. Another significant change took place in 1860, when the British government transferred the control of Indian affairs to the Province of Canada.
Key Points

- Pre-Conquest relations between Aboriginal nations and newcomers (principally French and British) could be described as military and economic alliances and collaborations.

- Beginning with the Royal Proclamation in 1763, Aboriginal title was recognized by the British regime at a time when military alliances with powerful indigenous communities were sought after.

- Military circumstances changed after 1815 and so too did the Euro-Canadian perspective on Aboriginal peoples.

- The phase that followed focused on assimilating Aboriginal peoples into the economic and cultural norms of Euro-Canadians. This process was known as “civilizing.”

Attributions

Figure 11.5
Mohawk Institute farm in Brantford, [Ont.] (Online MIKAN no.3309629) by John Boyd / Library and Archives Canada is in the public domain.


3. See works such as J. R. Miller, Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).


