

CANADA'S SUBJUGATION OF THE PLAINS CREE 1879-1885

by John L. Tobias

In Canada's schools, students are typically taught that the government was "honourable and just" when dealing with the Indigenous peoples of what is now known as Western Canada. The popular story claims that the settler government offered Indigenous nations the means to become "civilised" and "assimilated" by means of "honest and fair-minded" legal commitments and treaties.

Historian John L. Tobias spoke with Cree families and elders to get their own accounts of this history and challenge the "persistent myth [perpetuated] by Canadian historians". He supported the facts of their oral histories with official government records.

THE BEGINNING OF TREATY

The myth: *"Canada began to negotiate treaties with the Indians of the West in 1871 as part of an overall plan to develop the agricultural potential of the West, open the land for railway construction, and bind the prairies to Canada in a network of commercial and economic ties."*

In fact, treaty negotiation began in 1871 at the insistence of the Ojibwa of the North-West Angle and the Saulteaux of Manitoba. They turned back settlers who tried to enter their territory, "demanded rents, and created the fear of violence" if rights were not respected. The treaty-making process only began *after* the government was pressured and intimidated. Canada first only offered "reserves and a small cash annuity" in 1871, which was rejected. The Saulteaux demanded farm animals, tools, and equipment. The Treaty Commissioner agreed to these demands, but did not send them to Ottawa, and thus were not included in Treaties 1 and 2. However, after protest, these "outside promises" were included in later treaties and made standard.

KEY NAMES

Big Bear: leader of one of the "largest Cree bands from the Saskatchewan River district"

Edgar Dewdney: Commissioner of Indian Affairs

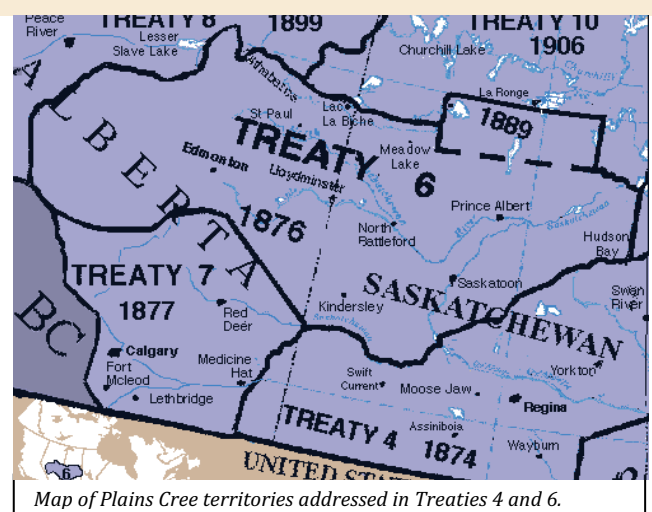
John A. Macdonald: First "Prime Minister" of Canada

Little Pine: leader of another one of the largest Cree bands in the area

Louis Riel: Métis leader, known for the so-called North-West Rebellion of 1885

Piapot: Cree-Assiniboine leader

Poundmaker: Cree leader



THE CREE AND TREATIES

Similarly, in 1872-1875, the Cree blocked construction and refused the use of land by settlers unless their rights were recognised and they received appropriate assistance to adapt their agricultural way of life, and that "non-Indian buffalo hunting would be regulated," as buffalo populations were declining.

Big Bear, Little Pine, and Piapot refused to take treaty, as they were concerned about Cree autonomy and skeptical that the government's promises would be fulfilled. Together, these three leaders had over half of the population of Treaty 4 and 6 areas, and this level of power concerned the Canadian government, who feared an "Indian Confederacy," or strong alliance that would wage war.

In 1879, the buffalo disappeared from Canadian prairies. Big Bear and Little Pine took their bands and many others south in pursuit of the buffalo, and those that remained faced starvation. Dewdney saw this as an opportunity to gain control by offering rations only to those who took treaty and recognising new chiefs if they had enough support. Those who had gone south returned hungry, and Little Pine's people convinced him to take treaty. Big Bear still refused, and many of his people joined new bands for the rations. Dewdney and the government continued to use food as a means of subjugating the Cree.

THE CONCERN OF CREE POWER

Big Bear, Piapot, and Little Pine knew that small, separated reserves would be easier for the government to control. They wanted to concentrate the Cree in a bigger territory to preserve autonomy, so they chose reserve sites next to each other around the Cypress Hills. The government agreed to these requests in 1880, but later realised the power that the Cree would gain. In 1882, the Cree and Assiniboine were told they would no longer receive rations unless they moved out of Cypress Hills. Faced with starvation once again and without the means to fight or travel, they moved north.

“The move to the north was not a sign of the Cree acceptance of the treaties as written, nor of their acceptance of the authority of the Canadian government.”

The Cree still sought to concentrate their people and maintain autonomy. Piapot, Little Pine, and Big Bear held councils with the Treaty 4 and 6 bands, with varying success. In 1884, Dewdney had “complete control over Indian affairs in the North-West Territories.” He adopted a system of punishment and reward to continue to try to prevent a concentration of Cree population and power.

The Cree petitioned the government, claiming that treaty promises were unfulfilled, and they were not able to live off the equipment provided. The government had provided “inferior quality wagons, farm tools, and equipment; and provide[d] insufficient rations and clothes and no medicine chest” and the Cree threatened “whatever measures necessary, short of war, to get redress.”

Dewdney learned about many councils expected in 1885 but reported that he expected no violence. Government officials still wished to prevent these gatherings, so he tried to placate the Cree by admitting the government had indeed violated treaties and ordered delivery of the rightful goods and increased rations. Dewdney planned to arrest leaders and use police force to prevent the meetings, with full support from Ottawa and Macdonald.

THE MÉTIS REBELLION AND THE END

The Métis clashed with the police at Duck Lake in March 1885. Though separate from the Cree movement for treaty revision, the Riel Rebellion gave Dewdney and the government the excuse and the troops to exaggerate small, isolated acts of violence and rebellion, and declare war on the Cree, suppressing them with force. He claimed that the Battleford, Fort Pitt, and Duck Lake Cree were all allied with the Métis and issued a proclamation that “any Indian who left his reserve was to be regarded as a rebel.” He also stationed troops on reserves. However, “privately, Dewdney reported to Ottawa that he saw [these actions of the Cree] as the acts of a desperate, starving people and unrelated to what the Metis were doing.” The Métis rebellion was simply an excuse for his years-long goal of subjugating the Cree.

Several subsequent military efforts against the Cree were allowed by Dewdney as a means to exert government control. Eventually, Big Bear and Poundmaker voluntarily surrendered and were charged with treason though Dewdney and eyewitnesses knew that “neither man had engaged in an act of rebellion,” and government reports had indicated “no plans for violence.” Big Bear and Poundmaker were sentenced to 3 years; both were released early due to ill health and died shortly after.

“By the end of 1885...Dewdney had deprived the Cree of their principal leaders and of their autonomy.” Military size was increased, and they were used to continue to forcefully “disarm and impoverish the Cree” and arrest those who protested, maintaining subjugation.

“Only by ignoring these facts can one continue to perpetuate the myth of Canada's just and honourable Indian policy from 1870 to 1885.”

KEY POINT

The Canadian government never behaved in the honourable and fair way that they would like for Canadians to believe. Only pressure and threats compelled them to participate in treaty negotiation, which they consistently failed to fulfill. The Cree (and other Indigenous peoples) also never passively allowed dispossession of their lands and autonomy. This is a history of deceit, fear, and broken promises, but also one of active resistance and loyalty.

Bibliography

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