



READING THE ENTRAILS: AN ALBERTA ECOHISTORY

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HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY



BC's charter, a nearly pure rendering of mercantile policy, intended not just profit for Charles II's friends but also to secure and advance his empire through conversion and settlement. That meant priests and farmers. Farmers take life at its lowest trophic level, converting habitat to tilled soil, an alien environment for nearly all wild things—a kind of clearcutting of life from the soil up. As farmers ploughed the land, preachers ploughed its people. Missionaries wanted to supplant the hunter-gatherer spirit of Native people with a shiny white new soul. This new improved Indian would throw off savage ways and take up the plough or cow for Christ and empire.

But both priest and farmer would destroy the fur business and that worried HBC. Not happy to subordinate commercial interests to imperial ambitions HBC's governors held settlers and their spiritual cheerleaders at bay as long as they could. The fur industry's exploitative ways would prove less a threat to Native ways and the land than would the coming multitudes. Preachers led the way, first arriving in Alberta in September of 1838. Cant and cadence told of healing and helping, counselling and curing, education and salvation, but their overriding objective was institutional, to expand the empires of man and God as England saw them.

HBC's monopoly irritated the church and frustrated liberals, and its failure to seize and settle the land infuriated mercantilists. All pressed to break the monopoly and settle the land. An 1849 Red River trial convicted Guillaume Sayer and others of trafficking in Rupert's Land furs, contrary to the monopoly provisions of Charles II's charter. Admonishment was their sentence.¹ With such tepid sanctions, this marked the substantial end of HBC's monopoly. But the appearance continued on, for a time. In 1859, a steamboat hooted and puffed its way down the Red River from the U.S.A., scattering bewildered canoes. The cargo on this industrial-age contraption was machines and technology from the east including a printing press for

the west's first newspaper. Despite HBC efforts to fend off this new age (in a predictable monopolist response, it purchased the steamboat) mercantilism's last stronghold was fracturing.

In 1856, England's Commons appointed a Select Committee of the House to consider HBC and Rupert's Land; whether to eliminate the monopoly and open HBC lands up for exploitation and trade by others, and generally how to suffuse the western part of the empire with British civilization. Little was known of Rupert's Land then, even by HBC. The committee appointed John Palliser to lead a scientific expedition west of the Great Lakes, to assess and inventory it, and provide recommendations on its future development, settlement and usages, including an investigation into potential railway routes. Palliser's cautious 1860 report called for selective settlement as a way to bind Rupert's Land closer to the empire and thereby preclude American annexation.

Storm clouds from American Manifest Destiny swelled on the southern horizon. Imperial darkness brooded in the east. Monopoly shaken, title to grant lands under scrutiny and Americans menacing, HBC's halcyon days were over. The validity of Charles II's original grant was uncertain. Was the Crown's original claim to the lands good? Was discovery a sufficient basis to claim Rupert's Land? What about competing French discoveries? Did England and HBC's claims defeat radical or aboriginal title? Was the grant to HBC limited to certain uses? Was it revocable? What was the nature of the HBC interest? Classical liberals, Americans and Canada West all had an interest in defeating Charles II's grant. So did Native people and Metis—if they only knew.

With so much riding on the grant, HBC preferred bending to breaking. In those times when land was the key to wealth, HBC owned quite a piece of real estate, far more than it could swallow itself. HBC cast about for ways to turn this gigantic stretch of wilderness to power and profit. Changes would be required. From a traditional fur-trading mercantile corporation, with coincident obligations and duties to Crown and empire, it neatly metamorphosed into an industrial age corporation, led by power, profit and obligations to its owners.

HBC's commercial epiphany occurred in an 1862 meeting in which its future confronted its past. HBC's fur-trading tradition was represented by its governor, H. H. Berens; its future was represented by the Duke of Newcastle, who spoke for certain railway interests.² Peter C. Newman reports the meeting this way:

He (the Duke) presented the promoter's idea of slashing a strip across the heart of the HBC territory as a patriotic gesture to tie



the Empire together. Beren's reply was as indignant as it was emotional. "What?" he blustered. "Sequester our very tap-root? Take away the fertile lands where our buffaloes feed? Let in all kinds of people to squat and settle and frighten away the fur-bearing animals they don't kill and hunt? Impossible! Destruction—extinction—of our time-honoured industry

That emphatic defence of his turf having been delivered, the Governor reverted to type and, shrewdly squinting at the Duke, queried: "If these gentlemen are so patriotic, why don't they buy us out?" "What is your price?" calmly inquired the Colonial Secretary. "Well, about a million and a half."³

Within months railway, banking and other interests structured the deal, arranged financing and completed it. HBC's taproot was readied for sequestration.

In this friendly takeover, original shareholders sold £100 shares for £300. Proceeds of a public offering grossed £2,000,000 to finance the purchase. About £1,500,000 of those proceeds paid out the original shareholders (a tripling of their share value), leaving an estimated £300,000 for the promoters. The Prospectus pledged that the Southern District of HBC's 1.4 million square miles (3.6 million square kilometres) of land "will be opened to European Colonization under a liberal and systematic scheme of land settlement."⁴ Industrial age economic elites replaced hereditary elites at the helm of a born-again HBC.

With urging from the empire, five years later (1867), four of British North America's colonies rafted up to form the Dominion of Canada. In confederating, Canada became a satellite nation, enjoying autonomy in some things but not others. Imperial control over such matters as declarations of war, external affairs, treaties, consistency with imperial laws and constitutional change persisted long afterward.⁵ Canada continued to be an instrument of imperial purposes until after World War I, and while tethered closely to empire, hobbled American expansion.

Much has been made of American Manifest Destiny, but very little of England and Canada's continental ambitions—*ad mare usque ad mare*. In 1867, the Dominion of Canada was a modest postcolonial amalgam, but its constitutional design was to expand to the world's then-largest nation. Canada's constitution dwells obsessively on the tools of empire—allocation of space, power and jurisdiction between constituted authorities. A construct of division, hierarchy, adjudication and compliance, it is nearly completely barren of life, people, rights or principles, at least until 1982. The *Constitution Act, 1867*, s.146 outlines Canada's territorial ambitions:



146. It shall be lawful for the Queen, by and with the Advice of Her Majesty's Most Honourable Privy Council, on Addresses from the Houses of the Parliament of Canada, and from the Houses of the respective Legislatures of the Colonies or Provinces of Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island and British Columbia, to admit those Colonies or Provinces, or any of them, into the Union, and *on Address from the Houses of the Parliament of Canada to admit Rupert's Land and the North-western Territory, or either of them, into the Union*, on such Terms and Conditions in each Case as are in the Addresses expressed and as the Queen thinks fit to approve, subject to the Provisions of this Act; and the Provisions of any Order in Council in that Behalf shall have effect as if they had been enacted by the Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. (emphasis added)

With the exception of Newfoundland (demurring a coy 72 years), Canada swept all the target lands into Confederation within six years.

While Canada federated, American settlers teemed west. First by wagon, then, on completion of the first U.S. transcontinental railway in 1869, throngs steamed out by rail. Hearing of Rupert's Land, some turned north to the 49th parallel, posing yet again, another American threat to HBC interests. With the empire urging them quickly on before the Americans made a grab, Canada reluctantly bargained to purchase HBC lands.⁶

The result, signed by HBC on November 9, 1869, was a deal of modest proportions involving an immodestly large portion of Earth's surface—most of the lands once-covered by the Laurentide Ice Sheet, the several million square kilometres of Rupert's Land. Canada's payment to HBC included:

1. £300,000 cash;
2. Leaving its fur-trading business assets intact, including some 50,000 acres (20,000 ha) surrounding trading posts; and
3. The right to claim some 7,000,000 acres (2.8 million hectares) of the best agricultural lands within the fertile region of the purchase.

For Rupert's Land imperial control descended to national control; corporate control gave way to new a form of colonial control.



THE RESISTANCE

No one talked to or traded with the Native people for their lands. Far-away elites cared for their interests through gentlemanly exchange behind closed doors but the interests of those on the land were ignored. Britain's Parliament remedied HBC's title and ultimately HBC surrendered its lands to Canada. December 1, 1869 was the date proposed for transfer. In soon-to-be Manitoba none of the 558 Native people, 5,757 French-speaking Metis, 4,083 English-speaking Metis and 1,565 White people⁷, not even the local governor knew particulars of this surrender:

As late as November 1869, Governor Mactavish declared that he was still without any official instruction, either from Canada or from England, of the fact, conditions or date of the proposed transfer. It is not surprising, therefore, that the half-breeds, feeling that they had been sold "like dumb driven cattle," determined to dictate their own terms to the Dominion of Canada.⁸

To imperial elites, the residents of the Red River Valley and lands beyond were treated as no-ones and nothings in *terra nullius*. The imperial commerce was in power and space, not people and place.

HBC surrendered the lands but Canada failed properly to assume them, leaving a gap in authority even by the acquirer's law.⁹ Into that hollow flowed Louis Riel's provisional government. Riel's goal:

. . . was not to fight Canada, but, with the whole body of settlers, French and English, behind him, to force the Canadian government to negotiate with the half-breeds the terms of their entry into Confederation. This was Riel's constant objective from the beginning to the conclusion of the insurrection. Their own terms, embodied in a Canadian statute and confirmed by the Imperial Parliament, were regarded by the half-breeds as the only safeguard for the interests of a people soon to find themselves on the defensive.¹⁰

Alarmed that Natives or Metis claimed rights reserved only for White people, indignant that local wits had outfoxed imperial elites, outraged over the execution of Thomas Scott, English-speaking White people clamoured for blood. But imperial minds calculated the costs and benefits of confrontation. Badgering and buying was usually more cost-effective than battling. Assurances of fairness and justice brought these first Manitobans to the



trade table. There, Canada largely had its way. Agreements were negotiated, some grievances addressed and the Red River Valley lands, now the new province of Manitoba (assented to May 12, 1870), were occupied for Canada. In this short and shallow struggle, the people of Assiniboia occupied just positions, far more than those they resisted. Even so, they surrendered upon modest concessions, some later reneged on. Riel, twice elected to the House of Commons, was refused his seat.

Perhaps service to empire is the measure that most calibrates Canadian historical figures. White heroes in the service of institutions distinguished themselves not for noble principles but for compliance in advancing the empire. These adherents contrast with the west's few people's heroes, usually Native or Metis. Riel is the Father of Confederation most distinguished for service in advancing principles of respect for resident peoples. Ultimately they hanged Riel, a "compelling rebel in a nation of cloying conformists."¹¹

It was time to seize the remaining western lands. For over 350 years the intentions of England's elites were clear. Cabot, Hudson, Charles II, Prince Rupert, HBC, the Imperial Parliament, the new nation Canada and its new Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, along with thousands of others, all followed the same path. It was the National Policy, the Imperial Policy. The fur trade continued its decline, the grant and its monopoly were memories and HBC had decided that the land itself held more lucre than fur. In the short term, the ongoing slaughter of the bison returned economic benefits. Longer term it would clear the land of a source of strength to the people of the land. But what to do then with Native people and the newly humbled Metis? Native people had become a problem to be resolved, not a resource to be exploited. Now they were the "dogs in the manger."

During Palliser's expedition, few White people lived in Alberta. About 30 acres (12 ha) were under cultivation at Edmonton House, a trading centre that boasted 150 White people. By 1870 the estimated pre-contact Native population of 10,000 had slumped to 6,000 in part because of the introduction of European weapons and diseases.¹² Monopolies and furbearers gone, the fur business thinned. The great bison massacre having now crested, "harvests" declined and the "resource" plummeted. This looked to be the cusp of boom on the turn to bust.

New business was needed—new ways of exploitation. England pioneered techniques to clear its lands of its inhabitants over the preceding centuries. The Enclosures movement purged the English countryside of its peasantry, replacing traditional land use with higher technology, machine and market driven agriculture. Might this have application in Rupert's Land? Get rid of the bison, the Native people and then bring in farmers and technology. Because this development strategy depended on international trade in



agricultural products, large-scale, efficient transportation facilities would be required. Railways were the high-tech solution of the day. And so there would be a railway.

Canada's 1871 commitment to British Columbia to build the transcontinental railway meant obligations to survey, partition and parcel the west, all to tame the wild land to private and productive property, the kind that railways feed on. That began nearly immediately with the *Dominion Lands Act, 1872*. There must be the empire's law and order. Dutiful local government was desirable economically and strategically. The *North-West Territories Act, 1875* established such government. Military and police power (or a paramilitary force) was required to ensure fealty to the new law, to protect White people's private property while taking the commons from the original people. The Red Coats came west in 1874. 



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In 1866, an event occurred that was the first step in a series of incidents to shatter the complacent life of Big Bear and other Cree leaders That summer, they learned that the Iron Stone was missing from its hill near the Battle River. Of all the monuments dedicated to Old Man Buffalo, the Iron Stone was the greatest and most venerated. It was a meteorite composed almost entirely of iron so soft it could be cut with a knife. A total of 386 pounds (176 kg) in weight, it was believed by the Indians to have been placed there after the flood by Nanebozo, the great spirit of the Ojibwa

“The medicine men,” observed a visitor several years later, “with unbroken faith in the creed of their fathers, prophesied dire evils to follow the removal of the stone which Manitou had placed on the hill. The buffalo would disappear, there would be a pestilence and fierce war. At the time the prophesy was made, I am told, the plains were black with buffalo, ‘whose ponderous tramping made the prairie quiver’; there were no indications of disease; war, though not unknown, was infrequent.”

Where had the Iron Stone gone? The Indians soon discovered that Methodist missionaries had loaded it on a cart and taken it Missionary George McDougall knew what he had done by taking the stone, for he commented that “For ages the tribes of Blackfeet and Crees have gathered their clans to pay homage to this wonderful manitoo.” He also noted that the taking of the idol had “roused the ire of the conjurors. They declared that sickness, war and decrease of buffalo would follow this sacrilege.”

Hugh A. Dempsey,

Big Bear: The End of Freedom

(Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1984), 37-38.

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