

READING THE ENTRAILS: AN ALBERTA ECOHISTORY

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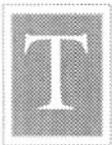
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TAKING NEW CANAAN

WANDER IN THE WILDERNESS



he plunge, mastery to misery, was swift and sorry. In the 1860s plains peoples climbed their prosperity pinnacle. Two decades later they lay wounded and dying on the valley's rocks below. Brute facts tell the overriding story. Before in the Americas, Native people possessed it all and White people had none. White people had the means to take it; their purpose in coming to the Americas was nothing less. White people seized it, leaving Native people little except duty to foreign gods, kings, capitalists and the lowest stratum in a harsh social hierarchy.

But these brute facts miss the taking's subtlety and finesse. Some vouch it was done by law, but not the law of the occupiers of the land (Native Americans), or the domestic law of the taker's land (England) for that law protected prior possession. No, it was the kingly law of discovery, which required little to legitimize claims to new lands. A hired sailor need only scramble ashore, stand above high tide, plant a flag, puff his chest and crow a claim of dominion in the name of a distant king. This was discovery. Those lurking in the wood, inhabitants of the lands for millennia—knowers, lovers and users of it all; born, lived and died on it—were “nothings.” Kings justified this, saying these lands languished empty until their arrival, devoid of ethically significant life, a *terra nullius*. This filip doctrinally flicked about 100 million Americans from being.

These early claims were the pivot for the Crown's claims over Rupert's Land and, of course, HBC's derivative position. For the several centuries that the fur trade flourished, HBC had little interest in taking actual possession of much of Rupert's Land. While the west's economy centred on fur, Native people remained on the land, doing the things they had always done but in exotic new ways. Trade terms were advantageous; Native people did more on the land for less than any Europeans. The breech-loading rifle, improved transportation systems, expanding trade and markets

catapulted Native people to wealth and prosperity during the mid-19th century. But the propellant for this ascent, ravenous trade and witless technology, consumed their resource. Plunging beaver and bison populations pulled down the fur trade with them, just as surely trapped and dying. European use for Native people died with the fur trade, leaving only their lands of interest to White people.

THE PROMISED LAND

But whose land was it? Perhaps Rupert's Land was not really Rupert's, the King's, the Squirearchy's or any White person's. Perhaps it belonged to Native people still; or, more heretically in this budding Christian dominion, to no man. On the other hand it might have been God-given, a new Canaan for another chosen people:

27. I will send my fear before thee, and will destroy all the people to whom thou shalt come, and I will make all thine enemies turn their backs unto thee.
28. And I will send hornets before thee, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite, from before thee.
29. I will not drive them out from before thee in one year; lest the land become desolate, and the beast of the field multiply against thee.
30. By little and little I will drive them out from before thee, until thou be increased, and inherit the land.
31. And I will set thy bounds from the Red Sea even unto the sea of the Philistines, and from the desert unto the river: for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand; and thou shalt drive them out before thee.¹

Was Alberta another promised land and its people Canaanites, perhaps part of a new Jerusalem?

Whether God's or not, it was the plan of those who thought themselves closest to him, England's elites. The beasts of the fields were driven out. The hornets of smallpox, starvation and bullets beset these Canaanites. The 300 years of clamour in the south, agonizing screams from American and Spanish blade and blasts echoed up into Alberta. Distant wailings were portentous; violence in the south might become violence in the north as White people "inherit the land."

Confederation hastened plans for Rupert's Land. Canada too, aspired to expand dominion and empire. That meant going west. It was its charge



and duty; its imperial destiny.² A transcontinental railway would consolidate this reach of the empire. Rail would stitch the far west (British Columbia) to the east, safely enfolding the vault of land between to Canada, securing it away from American expansion and Russian probings. Here in the midfolds lay unborn Alberta. This was Sir John A. Macdonald's plan in 1871. His restatement of the imperial plan, then 200 years old, had yet to address this—when and how to winnow Native people from the land? As the market gulped the last pelts of beaver and bison, its tolerance for Native people turned finicky. In capital's calculus, when their costs exceed benefits Native people must be offloaded.

Nearly constant European wars instructed the English well on means to deal with their foes. An island-centred “military-industrial complex”, its information and communication systems were leading edge, while its well-rehearsed national and military decision-making structures were efficient, unified and disciplined. Its people were compliant to command—they were civilized. Underpinning this was the world's most progressive and powerful economy, its first industrial state and its corresponding military might. A global storehouse of resource-rich colonies nurtured this mighty force's material appetites. Its unequalled transportation technology, particularly shipping and rail, carried its will wherever fear called or greed propelled.

In building empire, England learned finesse in taking. Elites found the military option generally too taxing, but military might is the hardness that stiffens softer strategies. Strategic use of military theatre and economic resources usually produced greater rewards than battle. Also, England had the advantage of knowing precisely what they wanted, to what extremes they might go to obtain it and nearly everything strategic about their opponents. One more ace lay up their sleeve.

CONDITIONS IN CANAAN

Vectors of power are one thing, factors of weakness another. A fatal debilitation might be to not know you are at war. For centuries White elites knew their New World ambitions, New World people did not. Amity-laden White signals obscured their true intent, while frequent Native attitudes of autonomy, friendship and cooperation disarmed them as to the European menace.

The effects of trade further disarmed Native people. Certainly trade provided horses and guns, but always in limited quantities, and guns were of dated technology and at White discretion. Purchasing defence from one's assailant may be risky, but trade did more. Through the specialization and interdependence wrought by trade, Native people transubstantiated from



people, culture and nation into factors of production. Interdependence means the producer no longer had freedom or discretion to trade, he must trade. The transient, sometimes illusory, benefits of trade bound Native people to it, locking them inextricably to its consequences.

With the bison gone, they had no goods to trade, then no goods from trade. Having abandoned the old ways and being abandoned by the new ways, the new Native globalized free-trade, market-based economy collapsed. This shut down Native people in other non-economic and more important ways—culturally and physically. Starving on the barren landscape, their stark dependency suddenly became obvious. Independence and freedom, culture and society had been part of the trade pact. Faint hope lay with distant, faceless, ambitious men.

Disease punctuated Native people's economic, social and cultural plagues. In the winter of 1819-20 measles wiped out one-third of Blackfoot and Gros Ventres. In 1836 diphtheria rampaged through the countryside. The next June White traders coming up the Missouri River disembarked with a cargo of smallpox, killing two out of every three Native people. Six of 9000 then in the Blackfoot Confederacy died.³ Winter 1864-65 brought scarlet fever and a return of the measles to Alberta and Saskatchewan. Another 1,200 Amerindians died and others were disabled.⁴ As market hunters gunned down the few remaining bison, a new epidemic of smallpox descended. In 1870 about one-third of the Metis died of it, while for Native people, as usual, the death toll was even higher.

Riel's resistance ushered in the 1870s. At the time many treated his resistance and provisional government as the scandalous revolt of a clutch of volatile, fully crazed half-breeds against civilization's legitimate advance. Others consider the Red River Rebellion as one of few acts of integrity in a history notable for its praise of oppressors and vilification of victims. But the victorious write the story and hang the rogues.

That decade also started poorly for the Blackfoot Confederacy. Their lands straddled the international border. Just south of the border White warriors roused up:

Early in January 1870, Colonel E. M. Baker left Fort Shaw on the Sun River, Montana, to punish the marauding Blackfoot band led by Mountain Chief, but the guide led the soldiers to the friendly village under Chief Heavy Runner, which was camped on the Marias River. At daylight on January 23, the troops surprised the village and killed 173 Indians of all ages and captured 140 women and children. The Baker massacre crushed the fighting spirit of the Blackfeet.⁵



Before 1870 on the Canadian side of the border HBC discipline seemed to restrain White people. After the HBC sale, that restraint diminished.

The White trade catalyst, alcohol, washed away the little coherence remaining to Native life. Medicine, care and compassion may have been hard to find, but where economic advantage obtained, alcohol poured forth in sufficient quantity to achieve its employer's objectives. Mounted Police inspector Denny records this bloody debauch in the Cypress Hills:

In May 1873 a band of Assiniboine were camped near Farwell's post and, as later reported, "whisky flowed like water . . . and by mid-day the tribesmen were all hopelessly drunk . . ."

Probably nothing extraordinary would have happened but for the arrival of a party of wolfers—men who lived by poisoning wolves then selling the hides. Wolfers were disliked by the Indians because their dogs were often among the poison victims. For their part these wolfers—later described as ". . . persons of the worst class in the country"—had no concern for either the dogs or the Indians they killed.

About noon on June 1 a man named Hammond who was staying at Farwell's post discovered that his horse was missing. He accused the Assiniboine and vowed to take two of theirs in retaliation. When he asked the wolfers to help, they eagerly grabbed their rifles and six-guns.

Who fired the first shot is uncertain, as is the number of Assiniboine men, women and children killed. Best estimates are that the wolfers massacred 20 Indians, including Chief Little Soldier. He was roused from a drunken stupor by his wife who attempted to lead him to safety in the woods. He refused to go, and as he stood defenceless was murdered by one of the wolfers. Another Indian, an old man, was killed with a hatchet, his head severed then mounted on a lodgepole. Four women were taken to Solomon's post, among them Little Chief's wife. Here she and another young woman were repeatedly raped. Next morning the wolfers buried their only casualty, Ed Legrace, under the floor of Farwell's post, burned it and Solomon's, then hurriedly left.⁶

The scene in 1873 was this. The fur trade is gone; the bison is gone. With little to trade, White goods are gone. Longer gone are traditional ways. Wolfers are starting their dirty killing business. Whisky traders are selling a desperate narcotic for those who have nothing else. White people have



been killing Native people with near impunity for some time and Natives live in overwhelming fear.

In 1874 the North-West Mounted Police, or Red Coats, marched west with arms but with little food, medicine or tools for the resident people.⁷ No, those would be held out later as rewards for those who would sell the last item of Native commerce, their homelands. Booze was one ruse. After more than a century of dealing liquor into Alberta, on the eve of the grand caper, paramilitary forces arrive to stop that trade. Yes, managing alcohol had its purpose but they hardly came to help Native people. Primary purposes lay elsewhere.

It was the empire's order, its law, its iron will and ways that marched west with these young White men. The annunciation to Canadians and settlers was "we have secured the way"; to Americans it was "this is Anglo-Canadian soil"; to Native people "White people have charge." Red Coats told Native people not to try any Riel resistance or you will be met by superior force. This force was an essential instrument to taking possession from those in possession. If treaty negotiations or relationships turned sour, White people would be protected. Whatever was required to secure imperial interests would be done. Of particular importance they must protect and ensure proper foundations for the great western railway promised three years earlier to lure British Columbia into Confederation.

Red Coats performed their task well. White-friendly stability crawled out over the plains and up to the parklands. Small communities rooted in the shadows of trading posts. A few cattlemen drifted in. These changes unsettled Native people further. What was their place in all things? The Sioux proposed a unification of Native peoples to drive out White people but Crowfoot declined. The Canadian experience with White people had been better than in the U.S.A. Yes! The Anglo-Canadian strategy was working.

CIVILIZATION MUST GO HAND IN HAND WITH CHRISTIANITY⁸

The Black Coats of European religious institutions harmonized well with Red Coats. Religion tried to refashion Native people by crushing what little was left of them. Their message was to reject yourselves: you are bad, your culture, customs and practices are bad, your religions and gods are bad, your past and forefathers were bad and your future will be bad too, except for us. Cultural annihilation was presented in the "love" modality. We love you, we are brothers, we give you great gifts of healing and wisdom from our all-powerful God, we bring you a better way of life, we come to save your souls, we give you eternal salvation because we possess the



means to heaven; but you must go through us as God's friendly neighbourhood representative.

Cultural imperialism seemed as important as religious imperialism to the Black Coats. If only Native people would accept their suitably low place in the imperial hierarchy and act like subservient village labourers with appropriate demeanour to god, country, empire and monarch. Newman argues:

What these opinionated parsons really meant when they railed about converting the "heathen savages" was that they were determined to make Indians not quite so outrageously un-British. "They struggled to recreate the English rural parish," wrote the historian Frits Pannekoel, describing the itinerant clerics' aspirations, "a little Britain in the wilderness, with the parson as a major landowner, teacher, custodian of charities, and law giver." They saw themselves as sharing these tasks with the other members of the elite: the squirearchy, the Company's officers and the settlement's Governor. The Anglican clergy's plans for this society placed them at the helm and made outcasts of all who did not comply.⁹

It was God's will that they go to church on Sunday and otherwise farm a section of land (if they had a family of five). Unfortunately few knew what farming was. These White fathers coaxed and cajoled, urged and seduced, promised and extolled these disease- and culture-shocked, starving, resourceless and devastated people to jump their sinking canoe for the shiny new imperial steamer.

Trade encouraged tribal structures to English attitudes of command, conformity, compliance and elitism. Cooperative, consensual and organizationally flat Native societal structures began to stratify. During trade and treaty making, men at the top, White and Native, consolidated authority and prestige, empowering chiefs and taking from tribes.¹⁰ Chiefs sometimes failed to care for the interests of lower-downs. Compulsion inveigled its way into tribal habit.¹¹ During treaty negotiations White people preferred only a few chiefs, each having the power to commit their people, in effect to bargain for entire groups without their consent.¹² Buy the leader and get the tribe (and their lands), that was the art of the deal. Big Bear worried precisely for that reason.



TAKING CANAAN

Now for the prize. Canada promised British Columbia a transcontinental railway when it joined Confederation. Line commencement was assured within two years of British Columbia's July 20, 1871 entry. Completion was to be within 10 years. What implications had these covenants for those occupying Rupert's Land? White forces were powerfully aligned and Native people were weak and failing, and oblivious to the subtleties unfolding around them. They could sign or die, slow starvation or by swift battle.¹³ The White strategy was to give them little, but assure them otherwise they would get less. Promise food after signing, but afterward give them what you will.

The first treaty negotiations affecting Alberta lands resulted in Treaty 4 and occurred in 1874. The establishment of the NWMP by legislation in 1873 preceded that event by a year; the Red Coats' arrival, by months. In August 1876 the Crees signed Treaty 6 turning central Alberta to White hands. In September 1877 the Blackfoot signed Treaty No 7, handing over the southern plains.

Treaties generally provided a signing bonus of \$12 for each man, woman and child; reserves consisting of one square mile (2.6 km²) for each family of five; gifts to the tribe of guns, tools, clothing, food and trinkets; and annual treaty money of \$15 to \$25 for chiefs and \$5 per individual.¹⁴ By treaty, tools, teachers and schools would help them become farmers and ranchers and Treaty 6 promised a medicine chest. As for Treaty No. 7:

The signatories were Crowfoot, of course, along with 34 chiefs and councillors from the Blackfoot, Blood and Piegan tribes; Commissioner Macleod and Lieutenant-Governor Laird (of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories) for the Whites. Witnesses' names provided some symbolic satisfaction: they were representatives of HBC, the NWMP and the Christian Church (John McDougall signed, but Pere Lacombe, regrettably, was ill and could not be present)—in other words, the three great spearheads of the invasion of settlers that was then in the offing.¹⁵

After the signing, the exotic White 1% held 99% of the land. The resident Native people, 99%, were permitted a derivative beneficial interest in the remaining 1% of the land, but even this interest would take over a century of law to establish.¹⁶

Treaties assumed bison extermination. Perhaps an opportunity remained for conservation of the bison and a way of life for Native people, but the Crown and capital followed the alternative. With the bison eliminated, they



thought, the Blackfoot would settle on reserves and take up farming. In his *A History of Alberta* McGregor has provided this insight:

Were they—the chiefs, not the thoughtless rank and file—aware of the meaning of the treaty? How could they be? They could understand that they would get a few dollars, some cattle and medicines, all visible items easy to comprehend. None of them, however, not even Crowfoot, could conceive of what it would be like to be cooped up on a reserve, grubbing year after year in a piddling field. Old Indians claim that none of them could comprehend giving up their hills and valleys and the land over which they had roamed, and have said that they might as well have been asked to give up the air and the blue sky and the sunshine.¹⁷

They did not comprehend, nor could they. In exchange for unbounded vastness, they received small plots of marginal land, not big enough for life, just about right for death.

By 1877, Alberta's Native populations continued in decline. Then there may have been 100 permanently resident White people. Soon too, White numbers would change. Railways have a purpose. Fill the west. Complete the taking by occupation. White ambitions at the time were focused on the plains and parklands of Alberta. With the fur trade nearly gone, the great northern boreal forest held little attraction for commercial interests. The need to negotiate treaties awaited a White use. It would take the Klondike Goldrush in 1899 to beckon Canada to negotiate Treaty 8 over northern lands. Here too, it was to ensure White control and safety.

White people claim Alberta's taking to be more civilized, less violent, than down south. And White people not Native people, they imply, deserve the credit. American settlers flooded west long before big government, big business, and big infrastructure took over. There, ahead of "law and order," the settlers did the dirty, dangerous and vile work to wrestle the land from Native people. On the other hand, Canada's taking was calculated and orderly, more institutional and contrived. After "discovery" there was imperial/mercantilist big business (HBC); then colonial-national government, Canada; then their military/police occupation to enforce their law and order (NWMP); then the massive Canadian government project of surveying, assessing, chopping, dividing the land, the bait for the settlers; and then another big business engaged in preparing the infrastructure for next exploitation, the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Most of the dirty work was over by the time White people unloaded the train. The



calculated and siren-soothing Canadian approach arguably saved more lives in the short run than the bellicose anarchic American style or the ruthless and immediate Spanish style, but the result, complete takeover, was the same.

Can the gentler atrocities of slow starving, dissipation and desiccation, out of sight, be superior to bloody defeat in battle?¹⁸ Battle leaves no uncertainty of the resistance, the conflict and the killing. With starvation, one can blame the victim; it allows the oppressor to argue his compassion and civility.

Take up the White Man's burden-
 The savage wars of peace-
 Fill full the mouth of Famine
 And bid the sickness cease;
 And when your goal is nearest
 The end for others sought,
 Watch Sloth and heathen Folly
 Bring all your hopes to nought.¹⁹

Social Darwinism made this all so reasonable. There was little doubt at the time that all of this was necessary and beneficial:

Let us have Christianity and civilization to leaven the mass of heathenism and paganism among the Indian tribes; let us have a wise and paternal Government faithfully carrying out the provisions of our treaties, and doing its utmost to help and elevate the Indian population, who have been cast upon our care, and we will have peace, progress, and concord among them in the North-West²⁰

Native people were set aside in spectral White cocoons, the reserves, threaded through with ignorance, arrogance and vile motives. Even the story of the devastation of Native people died. Unwritten, it was as if it had not been. The myth of the civilizing and selfless White people was written, and therefore it was. Native people became "ghosts of Canadian history."²¹ White people shifted the burden, washed their hands and turned to enjoy the spoils.

THE AFTERMATH

After the stripping of Native people from the land, remnant autonomy and freedom oozed away into remote White hands through the *Indian Act*, 1876, reservation living and the de-programming business. The church continued its pogrom; supplanting Native gods with White males in God's



clothes, gods that looked strangely like priests or pastors. Exhorted as the only hope for their children's future, education's two-edged sword sliced children from their parents and vestigial past while submitting them to a never-ending assault for assimilation. Cultural diversity was excised in the quest for the monoculture of English language, English traditions, Christian religion, high technology, Earth exploitation and materialistic accumulation. Education was not the objective so much as obedience to an alien god, people and government. Residential schools were primary weapons in this campaign.

Externally managed and isolated back on the reserves, Indianism withered, dying the agony of slow dismemberment. With lands parleyed away, they held no bargaining chips except the face of misery. Even that was hardly visible, buried as it was on reserves where the conscience of the White people was most often represented by the exploiters and managers. These dusty, dirty, littered repose were asylums of despair. The only general rights left to Native persons were to hunt and fish on unoccupied Crown lands.²² They lost everything except a conditional dominion over animals. Thus the hierarchy was maintained—Native people just above animals and even that imposed hierarchy was a White construct.

In only 140 years, with new and improving technology and international trade, the plains tribes had scaled high on the ladder. Their leaders were splendid, their economies vibrant, their cultures waxing. And they were ambitious, competitive, and innovative in an international economy. Then their sun set. Perhaps Native people traded beaver until it was gone, traded bison until it was gone, and then traded their lands until they were gone. Trade may have eaten Native people the same as it ate the bison. Both could profitably be exploited and both stood in the way of imperial ambitions for the west. Both were eliminated; one quickly by guns, the other by disease, alcohol, starvation and treaty. Bison ended up barely surviving in their enclosures, so did Native people.

Now, 10,000 years after the Quaternary extinctions, animal life was again in full retreat. Recently the lands lost the furbearers, bison, prairie wolves and plains grizzly bears. Remnant populations of other life hid out in isolated areas, in the high mountains, or the deep forest, in their refugia, hoping for respite. But starving people equipped with the most recent weapons prowled the land. The little bit of remaining life would soon be in the pot. Neither Native people nor White people had much disturbed the soil or the vegetation, and only a few exotics had arrived to displace nature's long work. Despite a denuded and depopulated surface—a vast silence—the land beneath remained sound. The next assault would be on the land itself.



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