

'First Nations Perspectives and Historical Thinking in Canada'

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DRAFT – PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE OR CIRCULATE

Racism is ‘fundamentally a theory of history.’¹ This observation by historian Alexander Saxton illuminates an important truth about the centrality of constructions of history in racial discourses, one that is particularly relevant in a white-dominated settler colony like Canada. Theories of history based on ideas about race have explained to members of colonial societies the otherwise obviously unjust process of displacing, dispossessing, and destroying Aboriginal people. These theories explained why Europeans were entitled to engage in acts of aggression and dispossession and often went even further, erasing the agency of whites with the notion of inevitability. As literary critic Maureen Konkle has recently described this justification, ‘According to this line of thinking, it wasn’t that actual white people were wreaking such havoc in Native societies but rather that the havoc wrought was inevitable when inferior met superior.’²

Since the 1830s, Aboriginal people in North America have produced spoken and written histories of their own that launched systematic attacks on these kinds of arguments. Historical thinking and writing have been important in Aboriginal resistance to colonization for a series of reasons. First and most simply, the elucidation of historical events and processes has been essential to Aboriginal efforts to understand their own losses and the difficulties they face. Second, Aboriginal people who encountered the self-justifying colonial histories of white society immediately perceived what was at stake in these constructions and sought to counter with their own understanding of what had occurred and why. But there is a third significant reason for the recurrent attention to history in Aboriginal writing, namely the denial of historicity to ‘Indians’ in white colonial mythology. Colonial thought in the nineteenth century increasingly constructed Aboriginal people as static, unchanging, and confined to a permanent ‘state of nature.’ Such thinking placed Native people outside history as mere relics of an earlier stage of human development, doomed to be superseded by those who had taken their land. Another strain of

colonial discourse simply erased First Nations people entirely, dating the beginning of history from the arrival of whites. Writing history, then, became essential to the Aboriginal project of resistance and survival. Producing their own histories has been a way of writing themselves into the new societies in their lands and of naming and documenting the wrongs of colonization. It has also allowed them to highlight their own change over time and ability to adapt like all dynamic societies.³

My goal in this paper is to examine interventions undertaken by Aboriginal thinkers into historical thought and writing in Canada, and to pose the question of their impact. The two earliest published Aboriginal writers in Canada, George Copway and Peter Jones, both penned books framed as histories of their Ojibwe people. More recently, there has been a considerable flourishing of Aboriginal historical production, from confidential treaty reports to videos to published oral and documentary histories. I will consider both early and recent manifestations of this writing to elucidate the main points, address the considerable continuities across time, and discuss their impact (if any) on non-Aboriginal versions of history.

Nineteenth-Century Writers

The published works of George Copway and Peter Jones, which languished in obscurity for over a century, were recently rediscovered and are receiving considerable attention from historians, literary critics, and others. While the two men are problematic figures in many ways, I would like to focus here on the ways they employed history in their efforts to defend their people from the worst effects of colonization. Copway's most historically-oriented book, the second he published, bore the title *Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of The Ojibway Nation* and appeared in 1850. Jones's *History of the Ojebway Indians* was published posthumously in

1861, compiled and edited by his English wife Eliza. These two men have been seen by some as sellouts and are often criticized for advocating assimilation, but a more sympathetic reading of their work in its historical context would see them as grasping for ways to be heard, accepting some terms of the European discourse in order to find a voice and then attempting to subvert it from within. In both the United States and Canada, the mid-nineteenth-century social and geopolitical context was one of aggressive Anglo expansion into new Aboriginal territories as well as growing conflict in the U.S. over slavery. At the same time the British Empire was rocked by a series of colonial rebellions. The resulting escalation of violence was associated with hardening racial attitudes among whites and a new insistence that colonized peoples were immutably, racially, biologically different. According to scholar Maureen Konkle, the notion of race as inherent difference was well-entrenched in North America by the 1840s, displacing the older Christian framework that saw non-white peoples as being culturally but not biologically inferior, and therefore potentially capable of equality.⁴

This unfavourable evolution in racial thinking was among the chief factors motivating Jones, Copway, and others to speak out, but at the same time it imposed narrow discursive constraints. Native intellectuals had to counter the imperialists' successful promotion of notions of racial inferiority and difference, along with the Manichean civilization vs. savagery ideology. In this context, it was practically impossible to argue in favour of difference *and* equality, since colonial discourses had bound difference (from British norms) so tightly to assertions of inferiority and, importantly, of unfitness for self-government.⁵ It was impossible to portray Aboriginal cultures as equally valid or valuable, given their fixed position within colonial ideology as the definition of savagery. A discourse of Aboriginal redeemability through Christianity and 'civilization' allowed these spokespersons to find an audience and a voice.

Aboriginal activists also needed alliances with sympathetic whites and, for the most part, these were available only among mission-oriented Christians and certain government authorities, all of whom were intent on implementing a policy of Europeanization. By contrast, in this period the only whites who argued for leaving Aboriginal cultures undisturbed were hostiles who openly hoped for their swift physical extinction as a people. All these considerations combined to compel Aboriginal intellectuals to argue for their people's ability to assimilate and thus to earn entitlement to rights and equality. Jones embraced this approach wholeheartedly and condemned nearly every aspect of Ojibwe culture. Copway also espoused assimilation, but worked to subvert its cultural implications to some extent by denouncing the wrongs of colonization and European institutions while asserting the superiority of Ojibwe ways. Both men used accounts of historical events and processes to critique certain aspects of the European presence. By arguing for their people's historicity and ability to adopt European ways, these spokesmen sought to fight colonialism's fatal linkage of 'Indians' with difference, savagery, exclusion, and extinction.

Although Copway and Jones took divergent approaches to depicting Ojibwe culture and society, in their constructions of history their accounts demonstrate significant similarities. Both denounced the damage wrought by colonization and the harms introduced into Ojibwe and other Aboriginal societies by white traders and settlers. In both his books, Jones repeatedly deplored the failure of white Christians to live up to their own religious rhetoric and condemned those who had harmed his people. In one sentence repeated three times with only small variations in his books, he exclaimed, 'Oh, what an awful account at the day of judgment must the unprincipled white man give, who has been an agent of Satan in the extermination of the original proprietors of the American soil!'⁶ Thus, while Jones embraced complete assimilation and worked to spread Christianity and Europeanization, he was forthright in naming colonization's

history of violence, expropriation, and introduced social problems, foremost among them alcohol.

George Copway, in his *Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of The Ojibway Nation*, attacked colonization and also launched a critique of European social institutions, which he compared unfavourably with those of the Ojibwe. According to Copway, Ojibwe forms of law, government, and social control revealed their superior rationality; their institutions operated through the appeal to reason, not coercion, and were much more effective than European ones in maintaining social peace. As Copway remarked about his people's means of obtaining social consensus without resort to force, 'They would not as brutes be whipped into duty. They would as men be persuaded to the right.'⁷ Given the centrality of reason in British claims to moral superiority, Copway's words were aimed straight at the heart of the 'civ-sav dichotomy,' to use Emma LaRocque's term.

Copway devoted several whole chapters of his book to accounts of the Ojibwe's wars with the Iroquois and the Sioux, including the Ojibwe's conquest, with their allies, of the Iroquois and their lands north of Lake Ontario.⁸ Copway emphasized his people's military prowess and territorial expansion, in a gesture that seems intended to evoke a parallel with the empire-building and expansionism in both the U.S. and his native Canada. At the same time, he mounted an outspoken critique of colonialism and commerce for their insatiable appetite for Aboriginal lands and their willingness to acquire them unjustly. He was particularly critical of the way alcohol was used by white traders and others to destroy Aboriginal people for their personal profit, a criticism that was also prominent in Jones's work. Finally, Copway addressed the accusation of savagery that whites made against First Nations people, reversing the direction of condemnation. Citing the North American wars between Europeans as one cause of the

massive decrease in the Aboriginal population, he stated, ‘During these wars the Indian has been called from the woods to show his fearless nature, and for obeying, and showing himself fearless, it is said of him that he is “a man without a tear.” He has been stigmatized with the name – “a savage,” – by the very people who called for his aid, and he gave it.’⁹ Not only were white readers censured here for their ingratitude and hypocrisy, but they also received a telling reminder of military history since the arrival of Europeans, in which Aboriginal people had repeatedly played a crucial role not only as opponents, but also as allies.

Both Copway and Jones addressed this history of military alliance. Indeed, many Aboriginal speakers in the nineteenth century highlighted it and used it as a point of reference in their arguments for a common future, shared between themselves and the newcomers. For example, a series of speeches made in 1841 by Ojibwe and Six Nations chiefs focussed particularly on the War of 1812, which was the central theme of this Aboriginal discourse in nineteenth-century Canada. The 1841 speeches were occasioned by the destruction of the Brock Monument, to which the chiefs and their people responded by donating money towards its rebuilding. They emphasized the common cause they had shared with Anglo-Canadians in fighting the Americans and also the loss of life this had entailed. This moment in 1841 represents only one incident in a sustained practice of First Nations people’s self-representation as historical and continuing defenders of Canada and the British crown. And for most of the nineteenth century, First Nations people continued to remind government officials of their significant military role in saving Canada from U.S. attacks in both the American Revolution and the War of 1812. This approach, I would argue, was not simply about claiming medals and pensions in return for their war services; rather, it was consonant with Aboriginal diplomatic practices that stressed mutual military aid as one of the pre-eminent features of cooperation and friendship

between nations. Through repeated allusions to this history, First Nations people sought to keep alive a relationship of goodwill and mutual protection between themselves and the crown that became increasingly important as their own numerical significance and political power declined.

Work Since 1969

Between the end of the nineteenth century and the late 1960s, there was a long period in which apparently no historical books by Aboriginal authors appeared. The one significant development in Aboriginal publishing related to history was the work of a few individuals in western Canada who were involved with the League of Indians, namely Mike Mountain Horse, Joseph Dion, and Edward Ahenakew.¹⁰ All three wrote in the 1920s and 1930s and published some short pieces in newspapers. All were concerned with history, seeking to counter colonial representations of both history and Aboriginal people. In each case, their writings were published much later as books.¹¹

But a fuller flourishing of Aboriginal history-writing did not arrive until the second half of the twentieth century. The current phase of Aboriginal intellectual production relating to history can be said to begin around 1969, with the major political mobilization around the White Paper and the publication of Harold Cardinal's scathing response to it, titled *The Unjust Society*. This work, aimed at a wide audience, garnered considerable attention and helped to begin the process of educating mainstream non-Aboriginal Canadians about the injustices of the past. Framing his well-aimed polemic around Trudeau's proclaimed goal of building a just society, Cardinal outlined the features of Canadian history that he considered central to the unjust society his own people experienced. He emphasized dispossession, deception, schools and the problem of assimilation, and lambasted the government for its history of smothering control, bureaucratic

red tape, indifference, and incompetence. Howard Adams' *Prison of Grass*, first published in 1975, took a similar approach, indicting Canadian society and the federal government and attaining bestseller status. Adams devoted most of his book to providing an Aboriginal view and interpretation of history, focussing largely on the West and especially on the events surrounding the Northwest Rebellion of 1885. Like many Aboriginal intellectuals, including Peter Jones and George Copway, he combined analysis of primary and secondary literature concerning historical events with the use of autobiographical details to reflect on the larger political, social, and historical experiences of his people (in his case, the 'English halfbreeds,' as he calls them). Cardinal and Adams highlighted many of the same issues Jones and Copway had raised a century before, especially the history of deceptive and/or forcible land seizure, the social ills created by colonization, and their people's exclusion from mainstream society.

Aboriginal writers of this period confronted a changed sociopolitical context in which nevertheless the same colonial relations and pervasive racist assumptions and practices still prevailed. The more liberal political climate made the contradictions of government policy and rhetoric more glaring, while providing a much more accommodating set of discourses from which to assail colonialism. The open espousal of racism was no longer socially acceptable and there was more public support for religious freedom that included Aboriginal peoples. Indeed, the Canadian public was prepared to be indignant at government paternalism, reserve poverty, and the oppressive features of the Indian Act, topics that Aboriginal writers and spokespersons tackled with great energy. Moreover, issues that could not be raised in the nineteenth century could now be addressed, such as the sexual exploitation and abuse of Aboriginal women by white men, a form of colonial violence that both Harold Cardinal and Howard Adams took the opportunity to name.¹² While Adams approached the issue obliquely by means of an anecdote

about racist taunting he experienced at the hands of some Mounties, Cardinal was more direct, and was almost certainly the first to be so forthright. He wrote, among other things, ‘The despoilation [*sic*] of our women by unthinking, unfeeling, self-indulgent whites stands as the most degrading insult inflicted upon our people. ... Turn the tables and see what would happen. Imagine a carousing invasion of one of your suburbs by roistering young Indian males in search of white girls for easy conquest.’¹³

Cardinal and Adams are the earliest and best-known of a small group of writers who have written openly polemic works that critique the present partly by expressing Aboriginal understandings of historical events and processes. One later writer who has written in similar terms is Daniel Paul in his book *We Were Not the Savages*, though Paul’s work is positioned more squarely as an academic, historical study, carefully supported with research into written documents.¹⁴ Yet this sort of overt criticism is less common than deploying autobiography as a means of taking on historical injustice and discrimination. A whole series of autobiographies published in Canada since the 1970s has raised these issues in subtler language, but with no less clear intent to expose and critique. Some of the better-known examples of this genre include Eleanor Brass’s *I Walk in Two Worlds*, Basil Johnston’s *Indian School Days*, and Jane Willis’s *Geniesh: an Indian Girlhood*.¹⁵

Since the 1970s, two developments have had major implications for the publication of Aboriginal historical interpretations. One is the gradual increase in Aboriginal postsecondary and postgraduate education, which has produced a slowly growing group of people who can comment with academic authority on events in Canada. The other is the federal government’s establishment of a land claims process that has generated a large historical research industry. Land claims are among very few ways that First Nations groups can obtain redress for past

injustices, gain acknowledgement of their losses, and bargain for greater access to financial and other resources. Thus there has been extensive participation in the claims process, resulting in a vast new body of historical research that represents a collaboration between non-Aboriginal researchers and First Nations researchers and governments. This phenomenon has involved many academic historians, anthropologists, and other scholars in claims research with significant implications for academic research in general. In the discipline of history, for example, the hitherto almost ignored treaties had begun by the 1980s to receive more serious academic treatment, along with general issues related to land, law, and the Indian Act. More attention was devoted to the attempt to access Aboriginal perspectives, imagine history from Aboriginal points of view, and comprehend the ways in which First Nations people were able to exercise agency. The academic literature on residential schools also has links to Aboriginal initiatives concerning these institutions, particularly efforts to obtain compensation for children's involuntary incarceration and mistreatment in them.

The last decade or so has witnessed a noticeable trend toward more widespread Aboriginal involvement in the recording and interpretation of their own history, much of it still located outside the academy. These recent works include oral history projects such as the Saskatchewan treaty elders oral history project coordinated by Harold Cardinal and Walter Hildebrandt, culminating in *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan*.¹⁶ This project arose out of the treaty process in Saskatchewan and claimed the energies of some of the most prominent academic historians involved in Aboriginal history. Then there are books such as Daniel Paul's *We Were Not the Savages*, Ila Bussidor and Üstün Bilgen-Reinhart's *Night Spirits*, the Glenbow Museum/Blackfoot elders' *Nitsitapiisinni: The Story of the Blackfoot People*, and *Ahtahkakoop*, written by Deanna Christensen with the Ahtahkakoop First Nation.¹⁷ Of course, there is also a

small but important group of Aboriginal academics in various disciplines who are speaking and writing about the history of colonization – Georges Sioui and Winona Wheeler in history, Patricia Monture, John Borrows, and Sharon Venne in law, to name a few. But the preponderance of works appearing *outside* the academic fold is noteworthy and suggests either a wariness of the academy or a lack of access to it.

Finally, it is worth noting the other kinds of venues where Aboriginal historical interpretations are being advanced. Storytelling venues such as the Yukon International Storytelling Festival have created some space for the relating of Aboriginal histories.¹⁸ Such a forum has certain advantages, including access to a fairly broad popular audience and, equally importantly, the emphasis on storytelling, accommodating the varied types of tales and tellings that are part of Aboriginal historical understandings. Other venues are provided by the media, such as radio and television, which can potentially reach an even larger audience, but have the considerable disadvantage of ephemerality. There are, for instance, Aboriginal intellectuals like Roger Roulette and Stan Cuthand who have published some written work, but also devote time to oral projects, and have worked for many years with Winnipeg radio producer Maureen Matthews. Recently, they made a radio program that aired on CBC's 'Ideas' about the concept of Mother Earth. In this program they address the way that this concept is now almost universally stated by First Nations people to be a central principle of their cultures and ways of relating to their land. Roulette and Cuthand, who speak Ojibwe and Cree, respectively, as their mother tongues, argue that the Mother Earth concept is not Aboriginal at all, but rather is imported from Europe. In fact, they say they have never heard old-time elders refer to the concept and that you can't even say Mother Earth in either Cree or Ojibwe. (They also state that Blackfoot elders who consulted with the Glenbow Museum said much the same thing.) They take on a few related

issues as well, such as the now-common assertion that the sweat lodge (which they say was used rarely in the old days) is the womb of Mother Earth. This, according to Roulette and Cuthand, would be a scandalous statement to Cree and Ojibwe people of the past, who would never refer to this part of a woman's anatomy except by euphemisms, and would never dream of creating, much less entering, a structure said to symbolize it. This radio program is one of the most innovative and thought-provoking (not to mention iconoclastic) pieces of research I have come across in some time. But it is difficult to imagine it being produced through academic research, right now at least. The pity is that it was aired once or twice on the radio and then disappeared. Though I have personally had some interesting conversations with Aboriginal people about its content, this program did not succeed in stimulating a larger dialogue because, unlike a book or article, it is not readily available.

Aboriginal people and academic history-writing

Nearly all of the work discussed to this point has been produced outside the academy, a fact that poses epistemological, political, and paradigmatic questions for academic historians. Does this choice relate in part to the mode of western academic inquiry and to the western knowledge project in general? When investigation of the conditions, attitudes, and experiences of First Nations people has been a central component of the colonial project in Canada, can academic inquiry be reclaimed to strip it of its oppressive connotations? Make no mistake – Aboriginal people did not have to read Michel Foucault to understand the meaning of hierarchical observation and the ways that knowledge collection underpinned the control exercised over them by the Department of Indian Affairs. Given these historical realities, can First Nations people find a place for their own forms of knowledge and their own emancipatory

political projects in the western-oriented academy that our universities represent? I would suggest – and hope – that they can, but that the process will require non-Aboriginal academics to display more openness, innovation, and willingness to take risks.

Another problem is the translation process that is required for many Aboriginal students to engage in the type of intellectual debate and inquiry that is pursued in academic institutions. Some of the barriers are linguistic (at least in Manitoba, where some students speak an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue), but others relate to distinct Aboriginal epistemological premises and intellectual concerns that are not reflected in university curricula. Anthropologist Julie Cruikshank has made perhaps the greatest contribution to explaining one of these epistemologies to the non-Aboriginal world through her work concerning storytelling and Aboriginal uses of stories. When Cruikshank first began to record the life stories of Tlingit and Tagish women in the Yukon, she kept finding that instead of talking about their personal life experiences, the women insisted on telling traditional stories about cultural figures. She finally grasped that the women were giving her cultural training to prepare her to engage with their society's form of historical analysis, which centred around the tropes, thematic concerns, and narrative structures of such stories. The women understood their lives in terms of the traditional stories they told and constantly reconfigured and reconstituted them to make sense of their own life experience and also of larger historical events such as the Yukon Gold Rush and the construction of the Alaska Highway. Such understandings of history and meaning are radically different from those disseminated in the academy. (One might note that a careful look at some (mostly) older academic history-writing does reveal a comparable process occurring in the creation of 'Grand Narratives,' where events were interpreted in relation to the story of nation-building, or historical materialism, or Great White Men. But the Tlingit and Tagish grand

narratives voice entirely different themes, goals, and values.)

Another issue worth considering in the academic community is whether or not there is room to expand the category of scholar. Aboriginal people frequently observe that their old people are the equivalent of libraries – but why not scholars too? The distinction here is essentially that between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ sources, where libraries deliver primary materials from which researchers may establish ‘facts,’ while scholars are those who synthesize material and form interpretations. Why do we not consider engaged Aboriginal elders to be scholars? Such people have interpretations and analyses, partly passed down from their own elders and partly developed through their own years of study. Julie Cruikshank has advanced the argument that oral tradition is secondary rather than primary literature because historical analysis and explication are embedded in it. In most Aboriginal societies, oral history and tradition are evaluated through a process that enforces rigour by comparing the comments and stories of several elders and affirming as certain only those that correspond with each other. So the question may be posed: should we always require university degrees to bestow the recognition of scholarship?

Clearly Aboriginal people are increasingly interested in access to publishing as a way to relate and interpret their own history – and they are not always turning to academic historians to do so. In fact, there is considerable suspicion in many communities that academic research is just another form of colonial exploitation. This perception is founded on the notion that non-Aboriginal people who seek information from First Nations people are only there to take something away, that their research is in effect a form of theft that robs the people of something valuable. In part this is a response to the fact that in the past, researchers often disappeared after doing their research and the communities gained nothing from participating – a phenomenon that

has not entirely ceased. But in part it reflects an understanding of knowledge as a precious possession that is owned by the individual knower. In many Aboriginal societies the sharing of any knowledge with non-kin was typically accompanied by some form of payment. Elders expect to receive something in return for relating their stories, and increasingly they expect substantial monetary payments. Beyond this, there is a strong feeling in many communities that their knowledge is valuable and should not be given away to outsiders. When a community is involved in any kind of treaty or land negotiations, there is a fear that community research could be used against them and adversely affect their negotiations. Thus, there are political barriers to collaborative research and there are also competing knowledge paradigms: a western/academic one that sees knowledge essentially as a common good and an Aboriginal perception of knowledge as valuable individual property.

There is another set of unresolved questions concerning the validity and uses of oral history and tradition. In the field of Aboriginal history, the belief that oral history is important has come to be almost universally accepted, and many academic historians are making greater efforts to conduct this sort of research. It is becoming almost a platitude to state that oral history is essential, but it remains difficult to do. In fact, if anything it is getting more difficult, as First Nations people become empowered to protect and claim their own knowledge and increasingly unwilling to vouchsafe it into an outsider's hands. The academic evaluation and award system also militates against pursuing much oral history, at least before tenure is awarded. Oral history takes far longer, and demands skills in teamwork and community relations that are not part of a historian's academic training and take considerable time and effort to develop. Doing it ethically and sustainably means relinquishing control over the content and timing of the end product, if any. Probably one of the most valuable things to do in this particular historical conjuncture is to

put academic funding and resources into projects that record and preserve the knowledge of Aboriginal communities without contributing directly to academic researchers' publication records. But to do so is risky for academic scholars and can hurt them in grant competitions and other evaluation processes they undergo. The main government funding body in Canada, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, has recently instituted a program that seems calculated to address concerns of this sort, but more change is required to facilitate new approaches to Aboriginal research in the academy.

That said, history as a discipline has made some efforts to respond to Aboriginal concerns. Despite the people's misgivings about academic historians, in some respects Aboriginal interpretations of history *have* been influential. Though an analysis of oppression and colonization did not originate solely with Aboriginal people, the strong emphasis on these interpretive frameworks from Harold Cardinal on has clearly shaped the writing of the two generations of academic historians and other scholars who have followed. Aboriginal history and also anthropology in Canada since the White Paper era have focussed extensively on various forms of colonization and oppression. This is perhaps most apparent in the literature on residential schools, where non-Aboriginal contributors to the literature have clearly been responding to public and private condemnations of the system issued by First Nations people. Indeed, this influence is linked to the actual collaborations that have occurred between Aboriginal organizations and scholars – for instance, John Milloy's book *A National Crime* began its life as a report commissioned by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.¹⁹ The literature concerning treaties has similarly been powerfully shaped by these research collaborations and infused with an Aboriginal understanding that emphasizes the spirit and intent of treaties, presses government and the courts to interpret them broadly, and sees these

agreements as founding documents of Canadian history.²⁰

Not surprisingly, academic history has been most receptive to Aboriginal influences that are easy to accommodate in the existing forms, epistemology, methodologies, and interpretive frameworks. Understandings that do not fit neatly into these have had less impact. For instance, traditional stories are an integral part of Aboriginal historical understandings, as Julie Cruikshank has demonstrated in her work with Yukon elders. This approach is also revealed, for example, in *Ahtahkakoop*, which was commissioned by the Ahtahkakoop First Nation of Saskatchewan and incorporates such traditional stories into its narrative flow, seeking to show the integrated cultural world of the plains Cree by underlining values and self-understandings. While Cruikshank's work has deservedly received a good deal of attention, the publication of *Ahtahkakoop* passed virtually unnoticed and the book appears to have had little impact on academic history.

There is also a fundamental cleavage between accounts such as those of Howard Adams and Daniel Paul and those of many non-Aboriginal historians in the approach toward issues of responsibility and agency. Adams and Paul place heavy emphasis on the wrongs of colonialism and white society and tend to portray Aboriginal people historically as more or less powerless victims. Even Harold Cardinal, who generally depicts his people as intelligent and self-confident, approvingly quotes David Courchene, president of the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood, stating that nineteenth-century government treaty negotiators were 'dealing with uneducated people' who were 'impressed by the pomp and ceremony and the authority of the officials' and 'really did not know or understand fully the meaning and implications' of the treaties.²¹ This image of Aboriginal treaty negotiators as ignorant, unsophisticated, and unaware is not uncommon in Aboriginal public discourse. In contrast, non-Aboriginal writers on this subject tend to stress

those treaty negotiations where chiefs like Mahwedopenais, Peau de Chat, Mistawasis and Ahtahkakoop demonstrated their awareness of coming changes such as mass immigration and the inability of their own people to halt the invasion (Ahtahkakoop, in fact, compared incoming white settlers to a swarm of grasshoppers who would strip the land and leave the people with nothing).²² That said, all parties agree on the basically deceptive language used by government negotiators, the pressure they placed on First Nations to sign, the prevalence of ‘outside promises’ made verbally but left out of written treaties, and the excessively narrow, legalistic interpretations the federal government applied in implementing them.

Conclusion

These preliminary observations allow the mapping out of some new terrain where academic historians could be more responsive to Aboriginal historical thinking. Perhaps the most difficult of these is the effort to expand our categories of what constitutes history, what constitutes a scholar, and even the constitution of ‘reality.’ For example, Native histories often include stories of ‘supernatural’ phenomena and ‘magical’ transformations from human to animal and back, stories for which the English language is sadly lacking in useful vocabulary and corresponding concepts. Native origin stories often conflict with western science’s insistence on its theory of Asian origins and migration across the Bering Strait. Few scholars have resisted the temptation to endorse western epistemology here and perpetuate science’s exclusive truth claim. Few of us have been willing to abandon our diachronic time scales and our chronological narrative structures for alternative formats. Finally, it has remained challenging for academic historians to contemplate a research agenda shared with or even determined by Aboriginal collaborators, or to surrender control of crucial decisions such as the uses and end products of

research. Until we take more steps in these directions, we are maintaining significant barriers between ourselves and the Aboriginal people whose histories we attempt to understand.

Notes

¹ Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990), 14, quoted in Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 6.

² Maureen Konkle, *Writing Indian Nations. Indian Intellectuals and the Politics of Historiography, 1827-1863*. Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004, 43.

³ 'For Native writers, to claim modern time is to claim the history of European depredations on Native peoples and to refute EuroAmericans' insistence that racial difference is the explanation for everything that happened to Native peoples, as well as for their eventual doom. To claim to progress through time, to argue that Native peoples can and will persist into the future, is to claim political standing and to insist on recognition.' (Konkle, 37).

⁴ Konkle, *Writing Indian Nations*, 40. Catherine Hall places the date for a similar transition in England towards the end of the 1840s and beginning of the 1850s; see her *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002),

⁵ For an instructive analysis of the concept of 'fitness for self-government' and its imbrication with notions of race, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 7-8, 14, 22-31, and *passim*.

⁶ Peter Jones, *History of the Ojebway Indians; with especial reference to their Conversion to Christianity* (London: A.W. Bennett, 1861), 29-30.

⁷ George Copway, *Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of The Ojibway Nation* (London: Prospero Canadian Collection, 2001; orig. 1850), 144.

⁸ The Ojibwe's military history, by the way, was also one of the main preoccupations of the other famous Ojibwe-authored work of the nineteenth century, William Whipple Warren's *History of the Ojibway People*.

⁹ Copway, *Traditional History*, 263.

¹⁰ Many thanks to Kathleen Buddle-Crowe for sharing with me her manuscript on Aboriginal publishing, which includes a most informative section on these three men.

¹¹ Mike Mountain Horse, *My People the Bloods* (Calgary : Glenbow-Alberta Institute; Standoff, Alta.: Blood Tribal Council, 1979); Edward Ahenakew, *Voices of the Plains Cree* (Regina :

Canadian Plains Research Center, 1995; orig. McClelland & Stewart, 1973), edited by Ruth Buck; Joseph F. Dion, *My tribe, the Crees*, edited and introd. by Hugh A. Dempsey (Calgary : Glenbow Museum, 1979).

¹² This subject could not be raised openly in the mid-nineteenth century, but it is worth noting that Peter Jones quietly attacked the use of the racist term 'squaw', stating in a footnote in his *History of the Ojebway Indians*, 'The Indians generally consider this word a term of reproach.' (Peter Jones, *History of the Ojebway Indians*. London: A.W. Bennett, 1861, 164).

¹³ Harold Cardinal, *The Unjust Society. The Tragedy of Canada's Indians*. Edmonton: M.G. Hurtig, 1969, 77.

¹⁴ Daniel N. Paul, *We Were Not the Savages: a Micmac Perspective on the Collision of European and Aboriginal Civilizations* (Halifax : Nimbus, 1993; 2nd ed. published by Fernwood, 2000).

¹⁵ Eleanor Brass, *I Walk in Two Worlds* (Calgary : Glenbow Museum, 1987); Basil H. Johnston, *Indian School Days* (Toronto : Key Porter Books, 1988); Jane Willis, *Geniesh: an Indian Girlhood* (Toronto : New Press, 1973).

¹⁶ Harold Cardinal and Walter Hildebrand, eds., *Treaty elders of Saskatchewan : our dream is that our peoples will one day be clearly recognized as nations* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2000).

¹⁷ Daniel Paul, *We Were Not the Savages: a Micmac Perspective on the Collision between European and Native American Civilizations* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1993; 2nd ed. published by Fernwood, 2000); Ila Bussidor and Üstün Bilgen-Reinhart, *Night Spirits. The Story of the Relocation of the Sayisi Dene* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1997); The Blackfoot Gallery Committee, *Nitsitapiisinni: The Story of the Blackfoot People* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2001); Deanna Christensen, *Ahtahkakoop. The Epic Account of a Plains Cree Head Chief, His People, and Their Struggle for Survival 1816-1896* (Shell Lake, Sask.: Ahtahkakoop Publishing, 2000).

¹⁸ See Julie Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Stories. Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998), 138-160.

¹⁹ John Milloy, *A National Crime: the Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999).

²⁰ See, for example, Arthur J. Ray, Jim Miller, and Frank Tough, *Bounty and Benevolence: A Documentary History of Saskatchewan Treaties*. Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000. Cole Harris's book *Making Native Space. Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002) is also strongly shaped by BC First Nations' century-long struggle for their land.

²¹ David Courchene, President of the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood, speaking during the regional consultation meetings with the federal government in December, 1968, quoted in Harold Cardinal, *The Unjust Society. The Tragedy of Canada's Indians*. Edmonton: M.G. Hurtig, 1969, 36.

²² See, for example, Ray, Miller, and Tough, *Bounty and Benevolence: A Documentary History of Saskatchewan Treaties*. Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000.