

# FROM "INDIANS" TO "FIRST NATIONS": CHANGING ANGLO-CANADIAN PERCEPTIONS OF THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY\*

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A look at three university-organized conferences, the first in 1939, the second in 1966, and the most recent in 1997, reveals an increasing awareness of Aboriginal issues — particularly in the 1990s. From the mid- to the late twentieth century, Indians, now generally known as the First Nations, moved from the periphery into the centre of academic interest. The entrance of Aboriginal people, "the third solitude," has altered completely the nature of Canada's unity debate. Section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*<sup>1</sup> affirms the existence of Aboriginal and treaty rights. The definition of "Aboriginal peoples of Canada" in the new constitution of 1982 now includes the Métis, as well as the First Nations and Inuit. Today, no academic conference in Canada on federalism, identities, and nationalism, can avoid discussion of Aboriginal Canada.

## THE YALE-UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO SEMINAR-CONFERENCE ON THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN TODAY UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO SEPTEMBER 4-16, 1939

Sixty years or so ago Native issues rarely entered into the consciousness of English-speaking Canadians. The federally-recognized Indians (those under the federal *Indian Act*<sup>2</sup>) then

numbered only 118,000,<sup>3</sup> or approximately 1 percent of Canada's total population of roughly eleven million. Many Canadians, including Diamond Jenness, one of Canada's best known social scientists, believed them to be a vanishing people. In his classic work, *The Indians of Canada*, published in 1932, the distinguished anthropologist wrote that "[i]t is not possible now to determine what will be the final influence of the aborigines on the generations of Canadian people still to come. Doubtless all the tribes will disappear. Some will endure only a few years longer, others, like the Eskimo, may last several centuries."<sup>4</sup> Intermarriage and cultural assimilation would make them extinct.

Among many English-speaking Canadians around 1939, all things British enjoyed pre-eminence. In that year, for instance, the young Canadian diplomat, Lester Pearson, a future Prime Minister of Canada, wrote of Britain in a published article as "the Mother Country."<sup>5</sup> Peter Newman, the well-known Canadian writer who reached Canada in 1940 as a refugee from Czechoslovakia, remembers Canada at the time as "dominated by White Anglo Saxon Protestants."<sup>6</sup> The veteran journalist John David Hamilton, born and raised on the prairies in the 1930s, recalls that "[w]e learned in Sunday School that Anglo-Saxons were the pinnacle of human beings and

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<sup>1</sup> being Schedule B to the *Canada Act 1982* (U.K.), 1982, c. 11.

<sup>2</sup> R.S.C. 1985, c. 1-6, online: CanLII <<http://www.canlii.org/ca/sta/i-5/>>.

<sup>3</sup> T.R.L. MacInnes, "The History and Policies of Indian Administration in Canada" in C.T. Loram & T.F. McIlwraith, eds., *The North American Indian Today* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1943) 152 at 160.

<sup>4</sup> Diamond Jenness, *Indians of Canada*, 7th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977) at 264.

<sup>5</sup> L. B. Pearson, "Love of Sport" in *Canada: Reprinted from the Canada Number of the Times, Published on May 15, 1939* (London: The Times, 1939) 265 at 265.

<sup>6</sup> Peter C. Newman, "A country of many cultures and flavors" *Maclean's* 108:30 (1995) 34.



civilization and no argument was permitted.”<sup>7</sup> In 1939, the Union Jack flew over all federal government buildings. Canada did not have its own national flag.

Native people were rare in Toronto in the 1930s. Unlike Montréal with the large neighbouring Iroquois community at Kahnawake (Caughnawaga), or Vancouver with the adjacent Squamish and Musqueam reserves, or Calgary with the Sarcee (Tsuu T’ina) on the southwest of the city, Toronto had no nearby First Nation reserve. The Mississauga once held land along the Credit River, just to the west, but the pressure of British settlement forced them to leave. In 1847, the Mississauga of the Credit relocated further west to the Grand River, next to the Six Nations (Iroquois) near Brantford.

From 1936 to 1938, Grey Owl, the son of an Apache woman and a Scot who had been a guide with Buffalo Bill, was the best-known North American Indian in Toronto and throughout all of English-speaking Canada.<sup>8</sup> The famous writer and lecturer, who lived and worked at his cabin in Saskatchewan’s Prince Albert National Park, visited Toronto in 1936. At the Toronto Book Fair, 2000 people crowded into the King Edward Hotel’s Crystal Ballroom to hear him, with 500 more left outside the doors as no space remained in the hall. On his last visit, in late March 1938, the tall, dark, hawk-faced man clad in mocassins and buckskins addressed an audience of about 3000 in Massey Hall. After his Toronto address, part of exhausting seven-month lecture tour in Britain, the United States, and Canada on the importance of conservation, Grey Owl returned totally exhausted to his cabin in Saskatchewan. He died in Prince Albert on April 13, 1938. Within a week came the exposé. The “Modern Hiawatha” was really one Archie Belaney, born and raised in Hasting, England, who had left home at the age of seventeen to live in northern Canada.

In the late 1930s, Tom McIlwraith, an anthropologist at the University of Toronto and curator of the Ethnological Collections at the

Royal Ontario Museum, wanted to educate others about Canada’s Native peoples. In the spring and summer of 1939, he organized, with the assistance of Professor Charles Loram of Yale University, a highly ambitious two-week conference on the welfare of the North American Indian at the University of Toronto. By invitation, over seventy invited Canadian and American government officials, missionaries, and academics participated, as did twelve Native people. For the first time in Canadian history, Aboriginal people attended a Canadian scholarly meeting.<sup>9</sup> Professors McIlwraith and Loram wanted to “reveal the actual condition today of the white man’s Indian wards, and in a scientific, objective, and sympathetic spirit, plan with them for their future.”<sup>10</sup>

From September 4 to 16, 1939, the conference delegates heard from various non-Native speakers about the cultures, reserve economics, health, and education of North American Indians in Canada and the United States. T.R.L. MacInnes, in his paper on Canadian Indian policy, made a startling declaration. The federal official with the Indian Affairs Branch pointed out that contrary to popular belief, the Indian population in Canada had reversed its previous decline and that in fact, “for the decade between 1929 and the present year, 1939, the average yearly increase is about 1 percent.”<sup>11</sup>

The press paid little attention to the meetings because, unfortunately, the timing of the conference could not have been worse. Three days before the sessions began, Hitler invaded Poland. Two days later Britain declared war on Germany. Throughout the first two weeks of September the press focussed on the rapid German advance

<sup>9</sup> For a list of the Native delegates, see Donald Smith, “Now We Talk – You Listen: Indian delegates at a conference in 1939 joined together to speak for themselves” *Rotunda: the Magazine of the Royal Ontario Museum* 23:2 (Fall 1990) 48.

<sup>10</sup> Charles T. Loram, “The Fundamentals of Indian-White Contact in the United States and Canada” in C.T. Loram & T.F. McIlwraith, eds., *The North American Indian Today* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1943) 3 at 4. For two small manuscript collections regarding the conference, see Correspondence re: Seminar Conference at University of Toronto/Yale (1939/1943), Ottawa, National Archives of Canada (RG 10, vol. 3186, file 464, 314, microfilm reel: C-II, 336); and, Office File of Commissioner John Collier, 1933-45, C. Conferences and Congresses: Toronto University Seminar (4-16 September 1938) Washington, D.C., U.S. National Archives (RG 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs).

<sup>11</sup> *Supra* note 3 at 160.

<sup>7</sup> John D. Hamilton, “McClung’s Racism,” Letter to the Editor, *The Literary Review of Canada* (October 1995) 27.

<sup>8</sup> Donald B. Smith, *From the Land of the Shadows: The Making of Grey Owl* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1990).



through western Poland. Midway through the meetings, on September 10th, Canada declared war on Germany, and the day after the Conference ended the Soviet Union invaded eastern Poland. The general public and press were too preoccupied to learn about the poor health conditions, unemployment, and the workings of the Indian residential school system.

On the last day of the conference delegates met to pass resolutions urging greater attention to “the psychological, social, and economic maladjustments of the Indian populations of the United States and Canada.”<sup>12</sup> A committee was formed to prepare the conference papers for publication, and to exchange information on the North American Indian. At this point a dramatic defection occurred. The Native delegates broke away from the main group and met separately to pass their own resolutions.

While appreciative of their invitation to the conference, the Native delegates resolved to have their own meetings. They did not need government officials, missionaries, white sympathizers, or Grey Owls, to speak for them. One of their resolutions stated: “We hereby go on record as hoping that the need for an All-Indian Conference on Indian Welfare will be felt by Indian tribes, the delegates to such a conference to be limited to *bona fide* Indian leaders actually living among the Indian people of the reservations and reserves, and further, that such conference remain free of political, anthropological, missionary, administrative, or other domination.”<sup>13</sup>

Canadians did not hear the Native voice in September 1939, drowned out as it was by the outbreak of the Second World War. Nor did Canadian historians, only one of whom — George F.G. Stanley, from Mount Allison in New Brunswick — attended the conference.<sup>14</sup> A number of Canadian historians during the war, and immediately after it, continued to reveal their ignorance of Native history. In the spring of 1944 for instance, Donald G. Creighton published his *Dominion of the North*, a well-written study,

which went through numerous editions and re-printings in the decades to follow. *Dominion of the North* begins with the Europeans’ arrival. It contains no separate description of North American Indian society, the first chapter being devoted to “The Founding of New France, 1500-1663.”<sup>15</sup>

In the mid-1940s, another professional Canadian historian, Edgar McNnis, diligently worked away on his one-volume study of Canada. Published in 1947, McNnis’ *Canada: A Political and Social History*<sup>16</sup> had a longer life than Creighton’s *Dominion of the North*. University instructors adopted it as a course text in Canadian history courses into the 1980s. From 1947 to 1969, it sold more than 200,000 copies.<sup>17</sup> In his book McNnis referred to North American Indians at greater length than Creighton had. One sentence best summarizes McNnis’s interpretation: “The aborigines made no major contribution to the culture that developed in the settled communities of Canada.”<sup>18</sup>

## THE TRINITY COLLEGE CONFERENCE ON THE CANADIAN INDIAN TRINITY COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO JANUARY 21-22, 1966

After the Second World War, more positive attitudes toward Native peoples emerged. Social scientists in the 1940s discredited the pseudo-scientific race theory of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the belief that certain “races” enjoyed superiority over others. The general acknowledgement of the strong contribution to the war effort made by the Native peoples and the injustice of their second-class status contributed to a small, but growing, public interest in Aboriginal issues. The decolonization movement in Asia and Africa, and later the civil-rights movement in the United States in the 1950s and early 1960s, contributed to a new consciousness of injustices to minorities, including the Native peoples. Most important of all, as they had at the Yale-University of Toronto Conference in 1939, Native leaders increasingly made their

<sup>12</sup> Appendix A, “Conclusions and Resolutions” in C.T. Loram & T.F. McIlwraith, eds., *supra* note 3, 347 at 347.

<sup>13</sup> Appendix A, “Resolutions Adopted by the Indian Members of the Toronto Conference” in *ibid.*, 349 at 349.

<sup>14</sup> George F.G. Stanley, Book Review of *A Canadian Indian Bibliography, 1960-1970* by Thomas S. Abler, Douglas Sanders & Sally M. Weaver (1977) 3:1 *American Indian Quarterly* 54.

<sup>15</sup> Donald G. Creighton, *Dominion of the North: A History of Canada* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1944) at 1-50.

<sup>16</sup> 4th ed. (Toronto: Holt, 1982).

<sup>17</sup> Robert Fulford, “By the Book” *Saturday Night* 99:4 (April 1984) 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* at 11.



demands known. For the first time, Parliament listened. The Indian Association of Alberta and other provincial Indian organizations participated in the hearings of the Joint Committee of the House of Commons and the Senate on the *Indian Act*, held from 1946 to 1948.

In 1951, the federal government partially relaxed its control over the First Nations. The new revision of the *Indian Act* allowed the band councils more authority. Women also gained the vote in band council elections. The revised *Indian Act* lifted the bans on the Potlatch and Sun Dance. It dropped the provision that prevented Indian bands from raising money to launch claims against the government. But, in one respect the *Indian Act* of 1951 reflected prevailing attitudes. Its underlying goal remained the assimilation of the Indian, although in 1960, the federal government did extend the right to vote in federal elections to all status Indians without requiring them to give up their Indian status.

In order to learn more about the aspirations of the Native Peoples, the Encounter Club, an undergraduate club at Trinity College, University of Toronto, sponsored what was probably the first student-organized Canadian university conference on Aboriginal Canada in January 1966.<sup>19</sup> On the University of Toronto campus, this was in itself a major contribution. For example, the History Department in the mid-1960s did not offer any Native History courses. As late as 1991, the University offered no courses in Aboriginal languages and had few, if any, Native faculty members.<sup>20</sup>

The Encounter Club formed in 1962-63 at Trinity. In 1963, it sponsored an impressive two-day conference at the college on African affairs. Over the next two years the club continued more modestly with individual talks throughout the

term, with topics ranging from the Sino-Soviet split, to Canada-US trade, to new methods of teaching mathematics in public schools. A notable evening in mid-October 1965 featured Dr. Cheddi Jagan, ex-Premier of British Guyana, who was in Toronto for the University of Toronto International Teach-In.

The idea of an Encounter Club conference on the First Nations had been first raised in March 1965 after a short presentation on the Native peoples. That summer, Chris Tupker, the newly elected president for 1965/66, together with a small organizing committee, set to work. The bulk of the ideas for the conference came from a consulting committee which included Walter Currie, an Ojibwa/Potawatomi from south-western Ontario and then an elementary school principal in Toronto, Basil Johnston, an Ojibwa who taught history at a Toronto high school, Howard Staats, a Mohawk graduate of Trinity (1962) who was then completing his law degree at Osgoode Hall, and Father John Mackenzie of Trinity's Faculty of Arts.

Aboriginal issues in 1965 still ranked well behind international and Canadian news stories. Contemporary media coverage of Native issues remained minimal. The common perception remained that only status Indians were Indians, which kept the public perception of the number of Aboriginal people in Canada, including the Inuit, at about 1 percent of the total Canadian population. This excluded the Métis. True, the First Nations numbers had increased, as the 1964 Indian Affairs Branch booklet *The Indian in Transition* stated: "[T]hey were once said to be a dying race ... Today Indians are the fastest-growing ethnic group in Canada — 200,000 strong."<sup>21</sup> But the dominant Canadian society, now approximately twenty million, had grown greatly in numbers itself thanks to the baby boom after the war, as well as very high levels of European immigration.

International affairs commanded greater attention than First Nations issues in Canada. In 1965, the Vietnam war heated up with the Johnson administration sending more and more troops to Asia. Domestically, in the United States, civil rights issues became ever more pressing. In March, 25,000 civil rights demonstrators marched

<sup>19</sup> The review of the Trinity Conference here is largely taken from Donald Smith, "Don Smith '68 recalls the 1966 Trinity Conference on the Canadian Indian" *Trinity Alumni Magazine* (Spring 1999) 4. For archival records regarding the conference, see 1966 Trinity Conference on the Canadian Indian, Ottawa, National Archives of Canada (RG 10, vol. 8569, file 1/1-2-2-1, pt. 5). For the most complete records on the Encounter Club and the conference, see The Encounter Club Fonds, University of Toronto, Trinity College Archives (Encounter Club Papers (F2012), files in accession: 985-0075/001(01) to 985-0075/001(08)) [*Trinity College Archives*].

<sup>20</sup> Tora Korenblum, "The Native Reality on Campus. The power politics of education" *University of Toronto Magazine* (Spring 1991) 20.

<sup>21</sup> Canada, Indian Affairs Branch, *The Indian in Transition: The Indian Today* (Ottawa: n.p., 1964) at 1.



from Selma to Montgomery, the Alabama state capital, on a fifty-mile freedom march. That August, race riots broke out in Watts, a suburb of Los Angeles, leaving over thirty people dead.

In Canada, French-English relations remained the predominant issue. Canada did obtain its own flag, at last, in 1965. Yet, despite this new symbol of nationhood, French-speaking Québécois and English-speaking Canadians appeared as divided as ever. The so-called “Quiet Revolution” in Québec in the early 1960s had led to a provincial demand for more power from the federal government. The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, established two years earlier to “recommend what steps should be taken to develop the Canadian Confederation on the basis of an equal partnership between the two founding races,”<sup>22</sup> indicated the rapidly deteriorating situation in French-English relations. In its preliminary report in 1965, the Commissioners asserted that “Canada, without being fully conscious of the fact, is passing through the greatest crisis in its history.”<sup>23</sup> That November, Pearson won the federal election and formed a second minority government. One of his new Québec Liberal MPs was Pierre Elliott Trudeau. In 1966, the newly elected Québec administration of Union Nationale premier Daniel Johnson summarized its demands in a phrase: “Equality or Independence.”<sup>24</sup>

In this atmosphere of concern about the escalating Vietnam War and deteriorating French-English relations in Canada, the Encounter Club and its helpers worked hard to bring Native leaders and university students to Trinity for the conference. Seminars with Aboriginal leaders were the most important aspect of the meetings. Thanks to federal financial support and to other donors, Indian university students attended from across the country, from as far away as British Columbia and Nova Scotia. Unlike today when nearly 30,000 First Nations students are enrolled in post-secondary institutions, in 1965/66 there were only about a 100 Indian full-time university

students in all of Canada.<sup>25</sup> Ironically for a conference organized so carefully to allow Native people to express their concerns, delegates registered under the watchful eye of Cecil Rhodes, the arch-British imperialist. His portrait dominated the Rhodes Room, which contains the photos of all the College’s Rhodes scholars.

All three Toronto newspapers carried stories on the conference. *The Globe and Mail* estimated the numbers of those attending at about 200 people.<sup>26</sup> Conference records do not contain exact numbers, but perhaps one-quarter to one-third of the delegates were Aboriginal, which was the conference organizers’ goal.

The list of Aboriginal panel members and university student delegates included an impressive number of contemporary and future Native leaders. From British Columbia, Bill Mussell attended; from Manitoba, Verna Kirkness, Isaac Beaulieu and Stan Mackay, the latter then a student at Winnipeg’s United College. Later in the mid-1990s, Mackay became the Moderator of the United Church of Canada. From Northwestern Ontario came Fred Kelly, who had been involved in the Aboriginal protest that fall against racial injustice in Kenora, Ontario. Both Kelly and Omer Peters, President of the Union of Ontario Indians, participated as panel members and seminar leaders. Several First Nations students came from St. Francis Xavier in Nova Scotia, including Fred’s brother Peter Kelly. A young man, Harold Cardinal, a Cree student from Alberta at St. Patrick’s College in Ottawa, attended. Just three years later he would write *The Unjust Society*,<sup>27</sup> a Canadian bestseller and an indictment of Canada’s assimilationist Indian policy.

In panel discussions and seminars, both Native and non-Native participants exchanged views. The panel led by Basil Johnston (who, through his books on Ojibwa life and culture, became one of Canada’s best known writers in the 1970s and 1980s) contributed to at least one fellow panel member’s growing awareness of Aboriginal issues. Dr. Daniel Hill of the Ontario Human

<sup>22</sup> Canada, *A Preliminary Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1965) at 151.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* at 13.

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Johnson, *Égalité ou Indépendance* (Montréal: Éditions Renaissance, 1965).

<sup>25</sup> For 1965/66 see the typed list, Indian Students Attending University 1965-66, *Trinity College Archives*, *supra* note 19 (file 985-0075 / 001 (04)).

<sup>26</sup> “5-point plan promised to help Indians raise standards of living” *The Globe and Mail* (24 January 1966) A5.

<sup>27</sup> (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1969; 2d ed., Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1999)



Rights Commission wrote less than two years later that “[i]f [he] were to point to our most serious human rights problem in Canada, it would be in relation to our treatment of native Indians. They are numerically significant and have encountered all forms of discrimination.”<sup>28</sup>

## THE MCGILL CONFERENCE ON THE REPORT OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

MCGILL UNIVERSITY, MONTRÉAL  
JANUARY 31 - FEBRUARY 2, 1997

In October 1966, a little less than a year after the Trinity Conference on the Canadian Indian, the federally appointed Hawthorn Commission produced the first of two volumes of *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada. Economic, Political, Educational Needs and Policies*.<sup>29</sup> It reported that the Aboriginal population occupied the lowest economic rung on Canada’s economic ladder, and recommended that they be treated as “Citizens Plus.” In short, on account of their treaty rights they deserved better treatment from Ottawa than other Canadian citizens. After the report’s publication, Prime Minister Pearson committed his government to revising the *Indian Act* after consultation with the Indian people.

Although great progress had been made since the end of the Second World War, First Nations groups remained relatively weak politically in the mid-1960s. *A Survey of Contemporary Indians of Canada* in fact commented that, “as a group Indians are a special segment of the disadvantaged poor who are usually unskilled in the arts of applying pressure, [and] possess few organizational means of effectively doing so.”<sup>30</sup>

In the 1970s, however, First Nations political organization improved dramatically. Core funding of Aboriginal groups by the federal Secretary of State, which began in 1971, helped. The increasing use of modern technology also enabled the resurgent Aboriginal leadership to communicate easily in a new common language, English, and in parts of southern Québec, in French. Increased awareness of American Indian struggles for

sovereignty and self-reliance in the United States also had an impact. But, the federal government’s own White Paper on Indian Policy,<sup>31</sup> approved by Parliament in 1969, did more than anything else to provide the momentum for the next round of the fight for Aboriginal rights.

In 1969, the newly-elected government of Pierre Trudeau ignored completely the Hawthorn’s “Citizens Plus” approach, and instead, without the consultation with First Nations leaders promised by Lester Pearson, Trudeau’s predecessor, introduced the White Paper. This government discussion paper, in essence, called for the assimilation of Indian peoples into Canadian society, the goal of Canadian Indian policy for over a century. Without delay, young educated, articulate First Nations leaders like Harold Cardinal joined ranks with Elders to oppose the government’s position paper. Instead of accepting assimilation into mainstream culture, Indigenous people across Canada organized and fought back. First Nations leaders adopted the Hawthorne Report’s phrase of “Citizens Plus,” arguing that they should have all the rights of Canadian citizens plus the special status confirmed by their treaties with the Crown.

In March 1971 the Liberal government withdrew its White Paper. The provincial and territorial First Nations political organizations representing status Indians in Canada and the National Indian Brotherhood (founded in 1968, and reorganized in 1981 as the Assembly of First Nations) worked next to secure the constitutional entrenchment of Aboriginal and treaty rights. Skillfully, the First Nations leadership learned to use the media in their struggle for legal recognition of their Aboriginal rights. Supreme Court of Canada decisions also helped. Their landmark decision in the Nisga’a case in 1973<sup>32</sup> was followed by other decisions which upheld the view that Aboriginal rights exist under Canadian law, and are entitled to judicial recognition throughout Canada.

<sup>28</sup> as quoted in Charles E. Hendry, *Beyond Traplines*, 2d ed. (Toronto: Miracle Press, 1973) at 9.

<sup>29</sup> vol. 1 (Ottawa: Indian Affairs Branch, 1966). The second volume was published in October 1967.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* at 384.

<sup>31</sup> Canada, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy, 1969* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1969) (Presented to the first session of the 28<sup>th</sup> Parliament by the Honourable Jean Chrétien, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development).

<sup>32</sup> *Calder v. British Columbia (A.G.)*, [1973] S.C.R. 313.



The ethnic composition of Canada changed greatly after 1967. Subsequently, support for assimilation lost much of its appeal. In our Centennial year sweeping changes in the Canadian *Immigration Regulations*<sup>33</sup> removed barriers which had prevented most non-Whites from entering the country. The new set of non-racist regulations led to a massive increase in the non-White population in Canada. By 1999, veteran journalist Lawrence Martin wrote of Canada as the “rainbow nation”: “[f]rom the all-white, Anglo-French culture of the 1960s, Canada has become the rainbow nation, the most multi-ethnic nation on the planet, one whose population reflects the world’s mix as much as any other.”<sup>34</sup> The declaration in 1971 that Canada was a multicultural country officially scrapped the old assimilationist policy. This strengthened the First Nations’ aspirations to remain distinct.

The First Nations’ well-organized political campaign helped achieve their goal of constitutional recognition of Aboriginal rights in the new constitution of 1982. It constitutionally entrenched a range of special rights held by Aboriginal peoples. From that date forward, parliament could no longer amend or override First Nations treaties without the agreement of the Aboriginal parties.

On account of their increased numbers, Aboriginal people today enjoy more political power. Now they are acknowledged to constitute 3 percent of the total population of Canada, not 1 percent as formerly, in 1939 and 1966, when the Métis were excluded from the designation of “Indian.” The definition in s. 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* of “Aboriginal peoples of Canada” as Indian, Inuit and Métis, led the 1996 census to report the Aboriginal population as approximately 800,000: 210,000 Métis, as well as 40,000 Inuit and 554,000 North American Indians.<sup>35</sup> The First Nations population itself has been increased by the addition of approximately 100,000 people due to Bill C-31, passed by

parliament in 1985.<sup>36</sup> Bill C-31 restored Indian status to all those women who had married non-Indians and subsequently lost their status under the *Indian Act*. It also gave status to the immediate descendants of these women. In addition, the First Nations population continues to grow faster than other segments of Canada’s population. Since the 1960s, the First Nations have continued to have the highest birth rate of any group in Canada.

Aboriginal issues became much better known to the general public in the 1980s, and particularly after the confrontation at Oka, outside of Montréal in 1990. Following Oka, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney appointed a Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in April 1991 to investigate the “evolution of the relationship among aboriginal peoples (Indian, Inuit and Métis), the Canadian government, and Canadian society as a whole.”<sup>37</sup> In late 1996, the commissioners tabled their five volume final report. Their 440 recommendations covered a wide range of Aboriginal issues, but essentially all focussed on four major concerns: the need for a new relationship in Canada between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples; Aboriginal self-determination through self-government; economic self-sufficiency; and, healing for Aboriginal peoples and communities.

Two months after the Report’s official presentation, the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada held a highly successful conference, entitled *Forging a New Relationship*, a full review of the Commission’s five volumes.<sup>38</sup> Over 900 people attended from every corner of Canada. The registrants included Anglophones and Francophones, Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, and a roughly equal number of men and women.

Ironically, the conference registration booth was located in the Stephen Leacock Building. Over half-a-century earlier the famous humorist

<sup>33</sup> S.O.R./ 67-434.

<sup>34</sup> “1967 marked turning point in immigration policy: A genuine global village has settled in Canada” *Calgary Herald* (27 April 1999) A16.

<sup>35</sup> “1996 Census: Aboriginal Data” *The Daily: Statistics Canada* (13 January 1998), online: Statistics Canada <<http://dissemination.statcan.ca/cgi-bin/DAILY/daily.cgi?m=01&y=1998&s=monthly>> at 4.

<sup>36</sup> *An Act to Amend the Indian Act*, 1st. Sess., 33<sup>rd</sup> Parl., 1985 (as passed by the House of Commons 28 June 1985).

<sup>37</sup> *Canada, Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Ottawa, The Commission, 1996), vol. 1 at Appendix A, online: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada <[http://collection.nlc-bnc.ca/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/100/200/301/inac-ainc/royal\\_comm\\_aboriginal\\_peoples-e/biblio92.html](http://collection.nlc-bnc.ca/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/100/200/301/inac-ainc/royal_comm_aboriginal_peoples-e/biblio92.html)> [the Report].

<sup>38</sup> See generally “Forging a New Relationship: Proceedings of the Conference on the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, January 31 – February 2, 1997” Donald B. Smith, ed. (Montréal: McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, n.d), online: The McGill Institute for the Study of Canada <[www.misc-iccm.mcgill.ca/publications/rcap.pdf](http://www.misc-iccm.mcgill.ca/publications/rcap.pdf)>.



and McGill professor of political science wrote a patriotic history, *Canada: The Foundations of its Future*.<sup>39</sup> In this book, Stephen Leacock disputed that the First Nations had any claim to the ownership of North America as they “were too few to count. Their use of the resources of the continent was scarcely more than that by crows and wolves, their development of it nothing.”<sup>40</sup> (How strange that he could write such an ill-informed statement, particularly as he lived each summer at Brewery Bay on Lake Couchiching, Ontario, only a few kilometres from Mnjikaning, one of the oldest human developments in North America. Here, for 5,000 years the First Nations used a complex system of underwater fences for harvesting fish.<sup>41</sup>)

During the conference’s plenary sessions the participants jammed McGill’s Fieldhouse Auditorium. They filled as many as six simultaneous breakout sessions on topics as diverse as the process for settling comprehensive land claims and the question of financing Aboriginal governments. In addition to the discussions in the plenaries and smaller sessions, information passed quickly among the registrants themselves in the wonderful, spontaneous, often completely-by-chance conversations that occurred between sessions. Truly the discussions that took place over the three days of meetings further proved the point, stated in the Report itself that “[w]ithin a span of 25 years, Aboriginal peoples and their rights have emerged from the shadows, to the sidelines, to occupy centre stage.”<sup>42</sup>

None of these three conferences in themselves led to dramatic immediate changes. Like education itself, the impact comes much later and it is on an individual not necessarily a collective level. These meetings are perhaps most useful to review for the indicators they provide of changing attitudes of the non-Native population in Canada toward the

First Nations, and the Aboriginal population in general. It would be challenging, if near impossible in most cases, to trace the impact of these conferences on individuals. To what extent did these scholarly meetings alert non-Native participants to Aboriginal concerns? I can cite one example from the Trinity Conference of 1966 — my own. I attended, and within one year of graduating in 1968 I began a study, still on-going, of the 500 year old encounter between Natives and Newcomers in Canada.

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<sup>39</sup> Stephen Leacock, *Canada: The Foundations of its Future* (Montreal: The House of Seagram, 1941). Seagrams, the liquor company, paid for the book. It printed 160,000 copies and distributed them free of charge to schools and libraries (see Michael R. Marrus, *Mr. Sam. The Life and Times of Samuel Bronfman* (Toronto: Viking, 1991) at 303-305).

<sup>40</sup> Leacock, *ibid.* at 19.

<sup>41</sup> Richard B. Johnson & Kenneth A. Cassavoy, “The Fishweirs at Atherley Narrows, Ontario” (1978) 43:4 *American Antiquity* 697.

<sup>42</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Ottawa: Canada Communication Group, 1996) 216, cited in Alan C. Cairns, *Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000) at 3.