

A Distant Canadian Mirror--*The Indians of Canada*

Written in 1889 by John McLean: Christian Missionary, Philologist and Ethnologist

By Peter Best

The antagonism existing between the customs, intellects, and lives of the two races, and the despondency consequent upon the changed life of the Indians are important factors in frustrating attempts for their amelioration in the present and the Great Beyond... Enlarged knowledge relating to reserves and missions, with the history of the conquest of countries and the training of races, will dispel despondency and create brighter hopes for the ultimate civilization of the Red Race. -John McLean, 1889

If apartheid were measured by results rather than intent, we would have it on reserves today. -Aboriginal writer and businessman Calvin Helin,¹ 2008

- This Essay reviews John Maclean's 1889 personal, first-hand account of the Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal political and social situation in Western Canada. It is far from the current, biased, hearsay accounts that we often encounter today.
- Mclean's book, *The Indians of Canada*, offers a respectful, eye-opening, and admiring account of actual Aboriginal, tribal cultures.
- Pre-contact Aboriginal cultures had gradually given up much of their advantages to the encroaching Euro-Canadian culture. Most obvious to Maclean is that these cultures came to a tragic end on the Canadian prairies with the extinction of the buffalo.
- As a result, many Aboriginals became wards of the state with no ways to support themselves. The economic and social basis of their former way of life was gone.
- This tragically newfound dependency required social assistance, mainly in the form of schools to help Aboriginal youth participate in the new economy and social systems in which they found themselves. Residential schools were intended to save Aboriginal people and not to rob them of their culture, which had already been lost to a great extent.
- The prevailing view of Canadian leaders was that racial integration was the only path to improving the lives of Aboriginals.
- At that time, many respected Aboriginal leaders, like Peter Jones and Joseph Brant, endorsed the integration of Aboriginals into the growing Euro-Canadian culture. There was no talk of Aboriginals remaining separate, sovereign nations.
- As a result, the common vision today that Canada can exist as a segregated country containing over 600 sovereign First Nations needs to be examined. Perhaps Canada should embrace Nelson Mandela's vision of an integrated, racially pluralistic country where all citizens are equal.

¹ His book *Dances with Dependency: Out of Poverty Through Self-Reliance*, Ravencrest Publishing, Woodland Hills, California, 2008

In Canadian courts, the notes written by witnesses at or near the time of the events described, such as police notes, are a *contemporary* record, and they enhance the credibility, truth, and reliability of note makers' testimony. Because of the use of these notes, their oral evidence is often preferred over the evidence of witnesses who testify about those events based on distant memory or secondhand knowledge.

Canadians are experiencing this with respect to the way our political, media, and academic elites, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, are characterizing Canada's past treatment of its Aboriginal peoples. We are being bombarded by present writers with biased and distorted accusations, far distant in time from the events and persons described, without supporting evidence, that our Euro-Canadians ancestors had contempt for Aboriginal peoples and their cultures, and it is being said that their treatment was nothing short of genocidal.

John McLean's *The Indians of Canada*², completed in 1889 in a response to a request "to send information on the Northwest tribes to the British Association, the Smithsonian Institution and other learned societies," is a generous, balanced account of what the situation was like then. Because it is a contemporary record, this book, like those police notes, is a far more reliable account of how it really was in 1889 than the accounts from these biased, present writers.

McLean's View of Aboriginals

This fascinating book is a call for ultimate racial and civic unity between the white "race" and the "Red Men." Its patent fairness and sincerity gives it a ring of truth, and exposes the shallowness and falsity of [today's elites' self-interested narrative](#).

McLean, a Christian missionary, spent nine years with the Blood (Kainai) Indians of what is now Alberta, learning their language, customs, and "wonderful mythology and traditions." He describes these manners and customs, in the hope that "the readers of these pages will have their ideas changed, as mine have been changed, by coming into contact with the Red Men, through their languages, literature, religion, folk-lore, and later Christian life."

Of course, McLean had a Euro-Canadian and Christian cultural bias. Notwithstanding his respectful and reverential description of Aboriginal culture, he accurately saw it as an essentially "earlier historical stage" of humanity's evolution, then experiencing its agonizing "end days." He sadly concluded that notwithstanding its strengths and beauties, it embodied an unworkable way to live in the increasingly settled and industrial world of 1889.

His belief that if Aboriginals "learned the lessons of man's equality, the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God, as revealed to them by Christian teaching, they would become strong and independent," would be criticized by today's ahistorical, "Indian Industry,"³ race-obsessed profiteers, and dividers. That belief, however, had been the core of Christian proselytizing to Aboriginals since the time of the Jesuits 250 years before, and as evidenced by the fact that the majority of Aboriginals today profess the Christian faith, it was clearly a sincere reflection of the times.

If readers still can't accept the book's Christian slant and its assumption of Euro-Canadian cultural superiority, they can still appreciate the book's deep historical scholarship and the author's deep understanding and respect for Aboriginals.

² Originally published in 1889 by William Briggs, 78 & 80 King Street East, Toronto, and then a Facsimile edition re-printed by Coles Publishing Company of Toronto in 1970.

³ British Columbia *Aboriginal* writer/lawyer/businessman Calvin Helin, the son of a Tsimshian Nation chief, in his book *Dances with Dependency, Out of Poverty Through Self-Reliance*, (above), has a harsh view of what he calls the "Indian Industry." Echoing John McLean over 100 years later, he writes: "If lasting solutions are to be found (to eliminate the "dependency mindset" forged by the welfare economics of the reserve system) the real Aboriginal social and political problems must be discussed openly and frankly... Aboriginal citizens must squarely face the Industry of Non-Aboriginal Hucksters and "consultants", and those Aboriginal politicians who are openly profiting from this sea of despair and poverty. In spite of what they say, this "*Indian Industry*" has no real interest in changing a system from which they are profiting." (Italics added.)

McLean asserts at the beginning that “due credit must, therefore, be given to the Indians for the intelligence, experience and sagacity displayed in all that belongs peculiarly to the native civilization.” Regarding their orators, whose eloquence, he writes: “has its source in the heart, is illuminated by the imagination, strengthened by intelligence and guided by reason” He further writes: “Good voices, keen intellects, independence of spirit, and love of liberty characterize many of the speakers among the Indian tribes.”

As to the essential Aboriginal character he says:

Underlying the blanket of the red man beats a noble heart, that shows true affection for his own kin, can be moved deeply by a brave action, and is true to the principles of honor, justice and truth. Under the warcap there exists a keen intellect, educated in the arts and sciences of the native civilization.

McLean’s objectivity is confirmed by his criticism of his fellow Euro-Canadians towards Aboriginals:

Honesty of purpose, and strict adherence to promises, characterize many Indian tribes, until the influence of the fluctuating and immoral paleface injects evil thoughts and tendencies into the minds of the untutored red man.

His book is filled with fascinating and illuminating facts. For instance, the reader learns that the federal government’s attempts to restrict the potlatch was not done for the purpose of destroying Aboriginal culture. This practice, a reflection of the ancient Aboriginal cultural practice of lavish gift-giving to attain higher status and respect in the eyes of others, was feasible when Aboriginals were independent and had their own means of self-support, so that what was given away could be replenished. But with the collapse of their old ways and their tragic, new-found dependency on the federal government, it made sense to discourage the deliberately self-impoverishing potlatch.

We also learn of the unusually high incidence of blindness amongst ancient Aboriginals, “arising from the smoke of the lodges, uncleanness, the habitual use of paint, and hereditary diseases.”

We learn of the many Christian missionaries who learned the native languages and invented script for them, so that they could be preserved, and so that the words of the Bible could be taught more effectively. McLean, an expert on native languages, closes his book with the Lord’s Prayer printed in Cree syllabic.

McLean was often unsparing in his criticisms of many aspects of Aboriginal culture. For example, he writes of the brutal and callous mistreatment of women, who were traded, bought and sold for horses:

Amongst the Blackfeet, marriage is simply a bargain between the suitor and the young woman’s father, for a certain number of horses.... In the good old days when the buffalo were abundant, the more wives a man possessed, the richer he became.... When the husband became angry with the wife he beat her with impunity; when he wished her no longer he sold her, and when she was found guilty of adultery, her nose was cut off.

He describes in detail Aboriginal practices of constant war-making, human sacrifice, scalping, slavery, ritual torture, blood-drinking, banishment, cannibalism, polygamy, kidnapping, and forced adoption. Clearly, [they were as much migrators and conquerors towards themselves](#) as present day Aboriginals accuse Euro-Canadians of having been towards them.

The fact that none of these practices would be countenanced by Aboriginals today shows just how *irrevocably lost* genuine pre-contact Aboriginal cultures are; lost to and overwhelmed by the irresistible attractions and advantages of Euro-Canadian culture, including in the case of women, the advantages of being protected by the rule of law against such mistreatment as described above.

For about 250 years prior to 1889, the Aboriginal peoples of Canada had enthusiastically embraced the profound, culture-transforming influences of the materially advanced Euro-Canadian culture. Over that time, with their adoption (called cultural appropriation) of the horse, brought to North America by the Spanish, the

gun, the metal knife, the copper pot, cloth, and all the other myriad, life-easing accoutrements of Euro-Canadian culture, and with their willing absorption into the prevailing Euro-Canadian mercantilist culture, they steadily, unconsciously, gave up their old cultural ways. By the 1880's, with the onrush of white settlers brought by the railroad, and now confined by treaties to reserves, little remained of their old nomadic, hunting, gathering, and warrior cultures. In this regard McLean writes:

The vast tracts of land are gone, game is becoming scarce, diseases of various kinds have been introduced, and the Indian brooding over his loss bewails his loss of independence, and his heart is in the ground.

As a result, Aboriginal people became wards of the new Canadian state, they faced a tragic, cultural catastrophe of the highest order, with, as McLean writes, "their glory faded, and day of conquest gone."

McLean writes further of this world-ending, cultural catastrophe with poignant eloquence:

Long years before the advent of the white man upon the continent, the highways of the New World were the trails of the red men. The rivers were the highways for those who travelled by canoe, and many scenes, strange and sad, were enacted on these waters. Over the mountains and prairies these singular pathways led to distant campfires, and the homes of hostile tribes. Through the forest they led, unmarked by tree, mound or stone, the keen eye of the red man, and the instinct of the race easily guiding safely toward his destination. These constituted a singular network over the continent, and many started on their journey from their campfires and lodges who were destined never to return.

If these scenes of former years be revived, what strange emotions would fill our hearts? The men have gone, and much of their history has died with them. The fires that burned, the tales of adventure that were told, are things of the past. The railroads follow the old trails, and the remnant of the red race have receded. The well-beaten paths are almost obliterated, and a sigh escapes our lips at the thought of the decay of the Aboriginal history.

John McLean's contemporaneous assessment of this tragic demise of a people and their culture, which he identifies as a "*universally common* historical occurrence,"⁴ has been confirmed by numerous historians since 1889.

Dr. Diamond Jenness, in his respected volume *The Indians of Canada*⁵, wrote:

The civilized world is intolerant of (primitive) peoples, whom it has neither the time nor the patience to protect and train for three or four generations until they can bridge the gap between the old conditions and the new. So, the world is strewn with their wreckage....

Jenness' description of the tragic, seemingly inevitable series of events that contact with modern Europeans subjected Canada's Aboriginals to: alcoholism, smallpox, typhus, tuberculosis, the destruction of the hunting and fishing grounds, and the perpetual inter-tribal warfare, conducted with European weaponry, over an ever-shrinking land and food base, is painful to read.

Of the effect of Christianity Dr. Jenness wrote:

...the nature worship of the Indians was too vague, too eclectic, to withstand the assault of a highly

⁴ *The spider weaves the curtains in the palace of the Caesars, The owl calls the watches in Afrasiab's tower.* -Lines of a Persian poet on this timeless Ozymandias theme, quoted by Patrick Kinross in his book, *The Ottoman Empire*, The Folio Society, 2003. Afrasiab is the oldest part of the ruined, ancient city of Samarkand.

⁵ Sixth Edition, published by Information Canada in 1963. (Today, there's *no way* our history-denying federal government would have anything to do with the publication of such an honest, scholarly book. In fact, with Canadian academia being so intellectually debased and ideological, there's *no way* that such a book could be written or published *at all* today.)

organized proselytizing religion like Christianity, or to serve as a rallying ground for the bands and tribes that struggled without guidance to adjust their lives afresh. The epidemic of smallpox hastened its downfall, for in those days of trial and suffering that would have tested the strength of any religion the Indians called on their deities, their guardian spirits and their medicine men in vain...When the missionaries of a dominant race can invoke the aid of economic interests, they meet with little resistance from ill-organized religions. Although most of the tribes still cling to some of their old superstitions and beliefs, all of them very quickly transferred their allegiance to one or the other of the Christian churches....

Of alcohol he wrote:

Whiskey and brandy destroyed the self-respect of the Indians, weakened every family and tribal tie, and made them, willing or unwilling, the slaves of the trading posts where liquor was dispensed to them by the keg. Even the fur traders recognized its evils and gladly supported the government when it finally prohibited all sale to the Indians under penalty of a heavy fine. Disease and alcohol demoralized and destroyed the Indians just when they needed all their energy and courage to cope with the new conditions that suddenly came into existence around them.

With the destruction of the beaver resource and the buffalo herds came "war and confusion" between the Aboriginal tribes affected and, by John McLean's time:

The buffalo herds at last failed to appear and the Indians, dying of starvation, had to accept unreservedly the conditions laid down by the white man... No longer was each tribe a self-contained and self-supporting unit, but from the Arctic to the Prairies and from the Atlantic to the Pacific all alike found themselves enmeshed in the economic system forced upon them from without. One by one they ceded their territories to the invaders, and wherever European colonization was proceeding, submitted to confinement on narrow reserves. The needs of the colonists then became their needs also, and in place of their former self-sufficiency, they were reduced to purchasing most of the necessities of life at European trading stores.

Dr. Jenness' book makes for grim, pathos-filled reading in places. But everything he wrote was observed and described by John McLean. Clearly, neither McLean nor Jenness were Eurocentric triumphalist. Rather, they were honest humanists sadly but in clear-eyed fashion dealing in facts and fact-based conclusions, something that is virtually non-existent amongst our political, academic and media elites today.

More recently similar events were described by Richard Gwyn in *Nation Maker*, his biography of John A. MacDonald:⁶

Ottawa's response to the loss of the buffalo was to pressure Indians to take up farming on their reserves as the only way they could sustain themselves. The scale of the challenge the Indians faced was not understood then, nor is it easy to comprehend it even in hindsight. In essence, the Plains Indians underwent a cultural catastrophe that encompassed every aspect of their lives-not just the material and political, but the social, the economic, the spiritual, the cultural, the psychological; each of these was either shattered or reduced to the redundant, the retrograde or, in the eyes of many outsiders, the comic. It is not easy to identify any people anywhere who have had to cope with so complete and swift an extinction of their way of life other than those defeated in war, occupied and reduced to slavery. Perhaps the best intellectual analysis of this transformational trauma is that by the American philosopher Jonathan Lear in his book *Radical Hope*. There, he explores the dimensions of a comment made by Chief Plenty Coups of the Crow Nation that, after the buffalo disappeared, "Nothing happened." Chief Plenty Coups was saying that once the buffalo were gone, his

⁶ *Nation Maker: Sir John A. Macdonald: His Life, Our Times*, Random House Canada, 2011

people became like the living dead.

Given this catastrophe, as also described by McLean, it was McLean's view that all that was left were "plain matter-of-fact Indians, facing the stern reality that soon, very soon, they will be doomed to earn their bread by the sweat of their brow." For Aboriginals not just to survive, but to thrive, they would have to join the new, mainstream industrial economy as farmers and wage-earners.

This was the urgent, compelling reason for establishing residential schools. They would provide Aboriginal youth with the education they needed to participate in that new economy. They would help the new generations of Aboriginals *integrate* into the new world that was upon them. They were established not to rob a people of their culture, as now wrongly and shamefully asserted. Rather, they were established *to save* a people whose old culture had already been irretrievably lost, as Chief Plenty Coup said, a culture that had been effectively reduced to a passive, dependent, anomic state where "nothing happened."

The tragedy continues into the present time. [No more than one-third of Aboriginal children ever attended a residential school during the times they were in existence](#). These schools produced [many successful Aboriginal Canadians](#), who integrated well into the mainstream culture, while still retaining their Aboriginal identity. Unfortunately, their numbers were never high enough to allow Aboriginals as a whole to resist the inexorable downwards and debilitating cultural drag of the Indian reserve, the main reality of which is segregated, ghetto-like dependency, learned helplessness, and anomie.

When McLean wrote *The Indians of Canada*, the reserve system was just getting underway. The situation was confusing and unprecedented, but Canada was preoccupied with building a country. The Aboriginals were in cultural shock, and it was too early to assess the reserve system properly. McLean made no comments on it.

John McLean and His Times

John McLean was an incurable Christian optimist. He believed that humanity was progressing steadily up an evolutionary ladder, where at the top, humanity would find its destiny as a unified cultural whole. He wrote that "red and white are the subjects of one Sovereign and the children of a common Father," and that unified cultural whole would be an "ideal race, the result of a union of nationalities speaking a universal language and accepting a common faith."

His lengthy, learned descriptions of ancient Aboriginal culture, particularly their religious and spiritual practices, reminds readers that humanity includes Canadians of all races and backgrounds, have almost everything fundamental *in common*, and that the things that make them appear to be different are just surface matters.

John McLean devoted several pages in his book to the life of Joseph Brant, the great Mohawk leader, who was also a strong Christian and absolutely loyal to Canada. His advice to his Aboriginal followers was "to live as good subjects, to fear God, and to *honour the King*." (Italics in the original).

McLean wrote of Brant:

He labored earnestly for the welfare of the Six Nations and sought to prevent the introduction of intoxicating liquors amongst them. *The education of his own family and the Indians, the directing of his people towards a life of industry and self-support*, and the supply of religious influences, employed the last days of the noble chief of the Mohawks. (Italics added)

Dr. Peter Jones, a famous Aboriginal Christian missionary and Crown loyalist of the mid-nineteenth century, discussed and praised by McLean, summed up one of Brant's essential messages to his fellow Aboriginals: "Forget sorrow and do your duty."

More recently, pioneering Indigenous lawyer, and one of the founders of what is now the Assembly of First

Nations, William Wuttunee, delivered a similar message to his fellow Aboriginals in *Ruffled Feathers*⁷:

Indians can work with the white man in partnership to develop a country which will provide for each of our children a legacy of great value. It is not necessary to separate from the white man, either physically or spiritually. The long period of separation of the two races has now ended.

Let us then unite in spirit, so that each of us can look forward to a peaceful old age in which we can see our children effectively participating in the creation of a new society. Many Indians have already taken the road ahead, to live in the land of the white man. They have paved the way for their brothers and sisters on which they must learn to walk without fear.

The hard knocks of history are pushing the Indian into a new way of life, and he must learn to accept this new challenge with faith and with hope. History has taught a hard lesson, but history will vindicate itself one day when the Indian finally finds his place in Canadian society.

Conclusion

Now, over 130 years after John McLean's neglected call for Canada to travel the path of becoming a unified cultural whole, we can properly regard the establishment of reserves as a huge *mistake*. Because of this policy, Aboriginal Canadians are at the bottom of every indicator of social and economic success. This great mistake should be corrected by changing our laws in a careful and compassionate manner, phasing the reserve system out, as no doubt John McLean would have assumed had happened decades ago. There are thousands of lives in the balance.

To ameliorate the present situation of Aboriginals we must first be courageous enough to admit the unpleasant, [illiberal reality](#) of our present situation. We must admit that the present attempts to "decolonize" Canada by in effect reversing the course of history, by trying to re-invent and re-instate a lost world, is a cruel, self-serving masquerade that, while enriching the privileged Indian industry, is inflicting great social, psychological, and material harm on the vast majority of Aboriginal peoples. We must admit that the reserve system is a racist failure.

The present legal and political place where Aboriginals in Canada exist, and where their leaders, now constantly spouting their fantasy "nation-to-nation" talk, are determined to keep them, is a segregated, cultural no-man's land where their wounded minds will never heal, which is a difficult, contradictory, cultural demimonde situated somewhere between a lost past, a dysfunctional present, leading only to a worsening future.

The only true and effective path for Canada's Aboriginals, the best path for them to recover their lost spirit (their *Orenda*⁸), is the path of full social and legal integration with other Canadians. This was John McLean's vision.

About the Author

Peter Best is a retired lawyer who lives in Sudbury, Ontario. He is the author of [There Is No Difference- An Argument for the Abolition of the Reserve System](#), which has been endorsed by retired Supreme Court of Canada Justice Jack Major.

⁷ *Ruffled Feathers- Indians in Canadian Society*, Bell Books Ltd. Calgary, 1971 (out of print)

⁸ See Joseph Boyden, *The Orenda*, Hamish Hamilton Canada, Toronto, 2013