

Preface and Acknowledgments

During the 1850s, Great Lakes aboriginal families began the difficult transition to reservation life within a region dominated by non-Indian newcomers. The natives' ability to move back and forth between the old ways and the newfangled ones brought by whites was a good omen and impressed forty-four-year-old British travel writer William H. G. Kingston. He visited an aboriginal village while his steamer was anchored off Christian and Beau-seuil islands in Georgian Bay and marveled at the "living Red Indians" and their wigwams. "But a change has come over them," he noted. "Even now they are no longer the same people they once were; for . . . the good-natured, easy-going, laughing, idle, brown fellow of the present day contrasts greatly with the fierce Red warrior of a century ago." Kingston observed that most of the men did not wear "ill-made blanket coats"; indeed, "some even had on shooting-jackets and caps, and others black coats and trousers, and black round hats." But that evening, while back on his boat, the past paid a visit.

Several canoes came off, some with squaws and their papooses, and others with men; but our friends had made an extraordinary change in their costumes, and had donned what they considered their ball-dresses. They were no longer the mute-like, respectable-looking citizens, in black coats and tweeds, we had seen in the morning; now huge plumes of many-coloured feathers decked their heads, and tails of foxes and other animals hung down their backs. Their faces were painted in stripes of red and black, while beads and feathers formed fringes round their waists, their knees and ankles. One carried a drum, and the rest bore in their hands war-clubs, tomahawks, and

calumets ornamented with feathers, while their feet were covered with embroidered moccasins. To be sure trousers and tweed coats could be seen from under the feathery and skin-coverings of bygone days; and one or two had put coloured shirts over their other garments to add grace and elegance to their costume. A funny jumble it was truly, the oddest mixture of the past and present I ever saw.

Once on board Kingston's steamer, aboriginal men performed a war dance while "uttering the most unearthly shrieks and cries."¹ Other tourists also must have thought it an odd mixture of past and present: birch-bark canoes tied to a Great Lakes steamboat while natives danced on the deck wearing both "savage" and "civilized" clothing.

Such sights were commonplace throughout the Great Lakes at this time. Thousands of moccasined Indians cautiously entered the Canadian and American mainstreams and, while preserving many traditions and their sense of Indian identity, developed ways to deal with an aggressively intrusive capitalistic world. The process lasted for many decades but was most challenging during the early reservation years between 1850 and 1900.

The scene of this accommodation and resistance could not be more important. Stretching 750 miles from east to west and covering ninety-four thousand square miles, the Great Lakes water system understandably became a barrier between the United States and Canada.² "We are separate countries today—separate and distinct" because of the Great Lakes, writes renowned Canadian author Pierre Berton.³ The lakes were indeed a physical barrier, yet their historic role was more complex and grand. Vast resources—strategic water routes, furs, fish, timber, minerals, fertile farmlands—triggered a centuries-long struggle for dominance among Indian nations, the French, the British, and, later, the United States. The final confrontation was the War of 1812. It shattered Tecumseh's dream of holding back the American juggernaut. Over the next four decades, Great Lakes Indians surrendered most of their homeland north and south of the international border and began to refashion their lives on remnant portions called reservations. Here, chiefs and councils worked to revive Tecumseh's vision: to preserve what was left of their homeland, their sovereignty, their economic independence, and their distinctiveness as Indians.

They did so within the context of momentous changes that reached beyond the Great Lakes. Canada and the United States also stood at a crossroads. Industrialization, the rise of big business, urbanization, and a westward-expanding market system aided by railroads and steamboats were poised to transform the face and the heart of each country. Families between

the Great Lakes and the Atlantic would no longer be as isolated, rural, and agricultural. All of this would occur at breakneck speed. What emerged by century's end were the origins of modern economies and societies.

Great Lakes Indians, besides facing an even more powerful and beckoning white mainstream, had to cope with insidious reservation intruders who worked and schemed to “civilize” and assimilate aboriginal men, women, and children and to control natural resources needed to support native families. The challenges faced by individual natives plus their chiefs and councils could not have been greater. No wonder Canadian and American policy makers, reformers, and reservation neighbors expected that within one generation—two at most—Indians would cease to exist as distinctive people and communities. The mainstream would surely claim them as it did the millions of European immigrants disembarking on North America's shores.

Fifty years after the reservation era began, these predictions proved false. Great Lakes Indian communities, though somewhat marginalized and assaulted from every direction by two separate nation-states, had survived. Moreover, they had preserved many of their core values, lands, and Indian identities. Forty thousand Indians also continued to shape the region's economic development. How could this be? How could hundreds of federal policy makers, altruistic reformers, missionaries, schoolteachers, Indian agents, and entrepreneurs be so wrong about the future of Great Lakes aboriginal communities and their homelands? How did native peoples negotiate the space between their traditional lives, which worked well for millennia, and the reservation life?

As important as this question is for understanding the heartland of two countries, historians have not addressed it in a comprehensive and comparative manner. Excellent studies abound about Indian policies in Canada or the United States, yet the only book-length examination of both nations' handling of aboriginal matters is Roger Nichols's *Indians in the United States and Canada: A Comparative History* (1998). Though that book is well written and insightful, its space did not permit a detailed discussion of Great Lakes reservations during the late 1800s. A handy, shorter overview of Canadian and U.S. Indian policies is provided in chapter 1 of Hana Samek's *The Blackfoot Confederacy, 1880–1920: A Comparative Study of Canadian and U. S. Indian Policy* (1987). Another important analysis of Indian experiences on borderlands west of the Great Lakes is David G. McCrady's *Living with Strangers: The Nineteenth-Century Sioux and the Canadian-American Borderlands* (2006). Most helpful have been monographs and scholarly articles that provide in-depth examinations of specific Great Lakes tribes before and during the reservation era or facets of reservation life, including religion, poli-

tics, and the development of resources, such as mineral and timber. These tightly focused studies are listed in this book's bibliography.

To understand how so many Great Lakes reservation communities—fifty-six in Ontario and twenty-five in the United States—persevered as Indians against enormous odds, one must go beyond existing general works and case studies. Fortunately, Great Lakes eyewitness accounts from the 1800s are voluminous and varied enough to answer fundamental questions about the early reservation years. The easier side of the story to tell is the role of government officials in Ottawa and Washington, D.C., and their field associates. Legislative acts and the annual reports of the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs and the U.S. Office of Indian Affairs leave little doubt about the motivations and actions of federal officials in their respective national capitals. Supplementing these materials are the field office records of Indian agents, including letters received and sent. Observers of federal reservation policies in action also included government farmers, schoolteachers, missionaries, travelers, newspaper reporters, and non-Indian neighbors.

Native responses to reservation life, especially the “civilization” and assimilation initiatives of Washington and Ottawa, were not documented in such detail. Nevertheless, the record is rather clear about the Indians' very active role in early reservation life. This included economic development, education, religion, and politics. Noticeable, too, in the documents was their awareness of events on other reservations, in recently ceded areas, and in national capitals. We know this because of comments made by reservation agents, schoolteachers, and missionaries. A more direct voice came from Indians who used the power of the pen and their facility with the English language to record observations and concerns in books and articles for public consumption or in petitions and letters intended for federal authorities. Field records of Indian agents, for example, are filled with letters from literate reservation residents requesting help with particular problems and from chiefs and councils demanding the righting of some wrong. The Indians' voice was also clear and assertive when they hired attorneys to defend reservation interests or asked local missionaries to articulate aboriginal points of view to the Canadian Indian Department or U.S. Indian Office. The aboriginal voice, though somewhat filtered, may be found as well in Indian agents' transcriptions or summaries of local council meetings or exchanges with groups of chiefs visiting the agency office. Finally, unrecorded Indian thoughts were acted out when some families refused to take up horse-and-plow farming, balked at giving up seasonal hunting-fishing-trapping-gathering of local food sources, and would not send their children to agency schools or listen to Christian evangelists. The viewpoints of chiefs and coun-

cils were equally clear when they fended off the efforts of Ottawa, Washington, and local Indian agents to dominate reservation decision making or to stop reservation delegates from carrying petitions to the national capitals and participating in regional Indian gatherings.

Resistance to the white man's civilization program was not the only set of actions that revealed Indians' perspectives. Accommodation also characterized their responses to Ottawa and Washington and to the many mainstream forces transforming the Great Lakes region. Indeed, Indian agency is the focus of this book. To underscore the independent responses of reservation people to the coercive plans of federal officials and to preserve a flavor of the times, I quoted rather extensively from nineteenth-century records.

These grassroots investigations revealed an answer to the central question about how Great Lakes Indians survived—as Indians. Having been consigned to reservations, they realized that their world was changing and that they, too, needed to change. Valiantly and creatively, they defended their cultural traditions as well as their economic and political independence. Reservation leaders, drawing on long-standing traditions of mutual respect and cooperation with non-Indians, sought a workable balance between the new and the old, between accommodation to altered circumstances and resistance in order to protect their peoples' resources and traditions. In short, they stepped cautiously into the shallows of the mainstream to try it out, but not far enough to be carried off and submerged. They chose which elements of each culture to keep or reject. This approach allowed chiefs and their followers to meet with varying degrees of success between 1850 and 1900 as they continued to shape their own history and that of the region.

Whether living on a reservation in Canada or America, natives responded in similar ways to their new circumstances. In part, this was because Algonquian and Iroquoian peoples lived on both sides of a porous international border, across which communication and travel were common. Ottawa and Washington also followed comparable Indian policies and organized field officials accordingly. Moreover, the winds of change that swept the Great Lakes during this period, especially the advancing line of white settlers and their market system, affected all aboriginal peoples of the region, north and south of the international border. Differences in Indian responses originated in part from the physical attributes of their reserves and the local climate, which, for example, might encourage or rule out farming as a way to make a living. Thus American and Canadian reservations, which shared much in common, became remnant homelands where Indian ways of life could still thrive and intermingle with selected features from the mainstream.

The nomenclature for this book supports this integration. The spelling of particular Indian groups varies a great deal among scholars and in the original sources. I have used the spellings suggested by the authoritative *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History* edited by Helen Hornbeck Tanner and others (1987). Thus, for example, the term *Ojibwa* is used rather than other versions applied to these Indians: *Anishinabe*, *Chippewa*, *Chippeway*, *Mississauga*, *Ojibway*, *Ojibwe*, *Otchipwe*, and *Saulteaux*. A useful synonymy for all Great Lakes tribes may be found in the *Handbook of North American Indians*, volume 15, *Northeast*, edited by Bruce C. Trigger (1978). For the sake of variety, I use *American Indian*, *Native American*, *natives*, *aboriginal peoples*, *First Nations*, and *Indians* interchangeably for the indigenous inhabitants of the Great Lakes region. The term *reservation* is employed throughout and includes Canadian entities called “reserves.”

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Although the pages of this book tell of another time, they are not just “old school” or ancient history. Their story is also about today, and its lessons carry across the ages. First is a warning. Lingering arrogance among

nonnatives, born of ethnocentrism and the belief that they know what is best for others, not only produced the unfortunate Dawes Severalty Act and the Canadian residential school system but continued to threaten aboriginal self-sufficiency, sovereignty, and self-determination in the twentieth century. Second is an inspiration. The Great Lakes reservation story of the late 1800s is about culturally resilient native families and community leaders who battled against great odds to survive as Indians even though their moccasins entered, in varying degrees, the Canadian and American mainstreams. To present Indians otherwise—for example, as hapless and tragic victims who benefited little from reservation life—does them and history a great injustice. Equally misleading would be to picture all whites as dominating tyrants. The power of the Indian past was captured in part by President Richard M. Nixon in July 1970, when he remarked to Congress:

But the story of the Indian in America is something more than the record of the white man's frequent aggression, broken agreements, intermittent remorse and prolonged failure. It is a record also of endurance, of survival, of adaptation and creativity in the face of overwhelming obstacles. It is a record of enormous contributions to this country—to its art and culture, to its strength and spirit, to its sense of history and sense of purpose.⁴

Reservation Indians of the Great Lakes, on both sides of the international border, earned their right to be included in this tribute.