

THE INDIAN TREATIES OF 1876

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ON August 12th of last year, at Carlton, Saskatchewan, there was held a brilliant celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of Treaty No. 6, in which the Indians ceded their land rights in this territory to Queen Victoria. Lord Tweedsmuir, Governor-General of Canada, was created an Indian Chief with the title "Teller of Tales". Prime Minister Mackenzie King received like honours and the name "Wise Counsellor".

It is very improbable that these distinguished men, or the assembled company, entertained the idea that anyone whose name was inscribed on the original treaty paper still lived. I believe myself to be the sole survivor of all who signed on that momentous occasion, and as I retain a very vivid recollection of the entire proceedings, I shall marshal the more interesting of the details associated therewith, to liven up this page of Canadian history.

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In July, 1876, the Hon. James McKay engaged me to go west with Governor Alexander Morris's party to Forts Carlton and Pitt, where Treaty No. 6 was soon to be consummated. At an interview in the Grand Central Hotel on Fort Street, Winnipeg, we settled all the details pertaining to my duties. I was to furnish my own team and equipment, and would be paid so much *per diem* from the time of leaving Fort Garry until our return. I was also to furnish provisions for myself and team at my own expense. Mr. McKay knew that I was familiar with the places named, having spent months with the Métis Plain Hunters at St. Laurent, which is distant about twenty miles from Carlton; while, as for Fort Pitt, my trading operations had acquainted me with that neighborhood.

On July 27th we were on our way, Governor Morris and Mr. W. J. Christie, one of the Commissioners, in a carriage with a driver of their own; and Mr. McKay, who was a huge man weighing very nearly if not quite 400 pounds, in a buggy he had had built especially for himself. He left a little later than we did. Pierre Levallier acted as guide, and a half-breed, named Joseph Genton, was driver for the Governor. Dr. Jackes, Secretary to the Commissioner, rode with me, and a most companionable gentleman he was.

On the 4th of August we arrived at Fort Ellice, about 225 miles from Fort Garry, where some Sioux Indians detained us most

of the day. Our next stop was at the Crossing of the South Saskatchewan, 18 or 20 miles from Fort Carlton. Here a large number of traders' and freighters' carts were waiting their turn to cross on the scow. A small band of Saulteaux Indians, who had made common cause with Chief Beardy of the Willow Crees in an attempt to disrupt the Treaty, had already tried to make trouble at the Ferry, and, if possible, to prevent the Commissioners from crossing the South Branch.

First, these Saulteaux were unsuccessful in enlisting the half-breeds in their cause. Then they tackled some of the Plains Crees, who were also unresponsive. Finally one of the latter pointed to the Saskatchewan:

"Can you stop the flow of that river?" he asked.

The Saulteaux answered "No". Whereupon the Cree said: "No more can you stop the progress of the Queen's Chief!"

That settled the matter. A Chippewa trader, Kiss-o-wayis by name, who was using the scow, offered it to the Commissioner, and we crossed in safety.

At Duck Lake—about mid-way between the Crossing and the Fort—we ran into Kah-mee-yes-too-weags, Chief Beardy, himself, who pretended that it had been revealed to him in a vision that the treaty should be made at a hill near Duck Lake! But the Governor said that he would proceed to Fort Carlton, where were encamped the main body of the Crees, with their Chiefs.

"Beardy", or the Hairy Man, was a contumacious chap, and actually had sent a message stating that he had not given the Governor leave to meet his Indians anywhere except at Duck Lake, and that they would meet him only there. However, the Head Chiefs Mist-ow-as-is and Ah-tuk-uk-koop, who were reasonable men, decided for Carlton. At the Crossing, a young Cree from the Indians, already assembled at the Fort, presented a letter of welcome from the Chiefs of the Cree nation. Beardy and his men finally made a great ado when the Governor's carriage arrived at Duck Lake. Their right hands held aloft, they invoked a blessing from the great Manitou on the happy day that had brought the Queen's messenger to them. A brave from the main band at Carlton advanced and shook hands with the Governor for all the Plains Crees.

Here, too, we were met by an escort of the North-West Mounted Police.

At Fort Carlton, the H. B. Company factor, Lawrence Clarke, had prepared quarters for the Governor and Messrs. Christie and Jackes; Mr. McKay preferring to camp about four miles from the Fort. On the first evening the two Head Chiefs of the Crees paid their respects to the Governor.

The site for the treaty was splendidly chosen, about a mile from the Fort. On a rise of ground the Governor's tent was pitched. On the tree-dotted plain some 250 lodges of the main Indian camp were gay with ribbons streaming from the lodge-poles. Between these and the Governor's tent was a clear space, and to the west was the North Saskatchewan, its further shore fringed with timber. The Union Jack floated to the breeze from the Governor's quarters. Beyond the Indian encampment were the tents of traders assembled to do business with the red man when the treaty should have been consummated.

The squaws and their braves wore colorful blankets. Taken all in all, it was a scene never to be forgotten by anyone with an eye for the picturesque. The main band of Indian ponies were herded some distance away, but horses of the N. W. M. P. were picketed around. The scarlet-and-gold of the Force itself added a note of gaiety to the whole. My former comrade and bed-fellow in barracks of 1870, the late Major-General Sir Sam Steele, C. B., M. Y. O., was with the detachment of Police at the treaties, and jovial was our greeting.

Here, too, I found my old hero, Gabriel Dumont, and his brother Eli, who was killed at Duck Lake in '85. It was my last meeting with Gabriel—an unconscious farewell to him and to several other old friends from among the Métis Plain Hunters. Later, I remembered very sadly these August days of '76.

On the morning of August 18th, the Governor, with Commissioners Christie and McKay, and Dr. Jackes, accompanied by Peter Erasmus (interpreter), were escorted by a detachment of Police, headed by a band, to the grounds. The Indians gave a simply magnificent exhibition of horsemanship, the whole band advancing in a semi-circle. All were painted in the most approved style, like zebras or leopards, as the fancy took them, and they marched, their headmen leading, to where the governmental party awaited them.

The Governor, in cocked hat, gold braid and lace, looked every inch a representative of the Great White Mother. He was ably seconded by the two Commissioners, Hon. Mr. McKay, himself a half-breed, of imposing physique, and acquainted with Indian nature from the ground up; and Mr. Christie, formerly chief factor for the Hudson Bay Company, also versed in the Indian character.

Shouting and gesticulating, mounted warriors raced around at top speed, brandishing and firing off their guns, re-loading and again firing, all without slackening the speed of their mounts. It was spectacular in the extreme. Chiefs, headmen and council-

lors, erect and stately, eyes focussed on the waiting Governor, advanced to within fifty yards, and halted.

Then began "The Dance of the Stem". This has frequently been described by chroniclers of Indian ceremonial, so I need recall only the main features. A long-stemmed pipe, gorgeously carved, was borne in front of the Chiefs by a brave who pointed the stem to the four cardinal points, drawing his fingers along its length. "Stroking the stem" they called this. Others participated to the accompaniment of dancing, chanting, and tom-tom beating. As the mounted braves gave another exhibition of horsemanship, the whole body advanced to the Governor's tent.

Forth stepped the governmental party to meet the stem-bearer, who passed the pipe to Governor Morris; and the entire party, by turns, repeated the stroking ceremonial, thus accepting the proffered friendship of the Indians.

Peter Erasmus then introduced the Chiefs and headmen. Before the terms of the treaty were outlined, the Governor in his quiet manner delivered a short address. Only a few words of it may be quoted here:

I have been for four years Governor of Manitoba and these territories, and from the day I was sworn I have taken the Indian by the hand and never let it go. We are not here as traders; I come to you children of the Queen, to try to help you. When I say Yes, I mean it. When I say No, I mean it too.

I will do here as I have done on former occasions. What I will promise, and what I hope and believe you will take, is to last as long as that sun shines and yonder river flows.

The next day the Governor again stated the terms, and again the Chiefs asked for time to consider the proposals. Mistow-as-is took the Governor by the hand, saying, "When a thing is thought of quietly, that is the best way". Accordingly he asked "this much, that we go and think of his words."

As the bands were being provisioned by the Government, the Indians strove to lengthen proceedings, and asked for a good many delays. They emphasized the fact that the buffalo, their main food supply, were fast disappearing, and that they were apprehensive as to their future, but were thankful that, as one of them put it, "a new life was dawning on them."

The following day was Sunday, August 20th. A service held by the Rev. John McKay was largely attended. In the afternoon he preached to the Indians in the Cree language, which he spoke fluently. A service was also conducted by Father Scollen, of Bow River. (Father Scollen was a good friend of mine, I had broken some horses to saddle for him the previous year.)

For three more days the Governor had to exercise patience with the redmen, and reasoned long with them. In his report to Parliament, the Hon. David Mills praised the tact of the Commissioners in "bringing the negotiations to a satisfactory issue". The picturesque Chief, "Poundmaker", was one of the objectors. Little did I dream, as I saw him talking to Gov. Morris, that in a few short years, he would be taking a leading part in a rebellion. He was a fine-looking brave, with his hair neatly parted in the middle, and long plaits of it bound round with fine brass wire hanging down each side of his face and neck, and reaching well over his shoulders. Though failing to sign the treaty, Poundmaker was not troublesome. He was argumentative, and very unreliable. But, by nature, many of the redmen were treacherous.

On August 23rd, the Fort Carlton Indians signed, but Chief Beardy, who represented only a small group of Willow Creees, would not give his adhesion till the 28th. And even then he continued to be a stumbling-block in the negotiations, for he asked the Government that, instead of a red coat, he be given a blue one! The Governor explained that all the Queen's servants wore scarlet uniforms, and that all the Chiefs' coats that he *had* were scarlet, so Kah-mee-yes-too-waegs finally accepted one of that hue.

The witnesses to this treaty were as follows:

(Signed) A. G. Jackes, M. D.
Joseph Genton.
John A. Kerr.
Pierre Levallier, His (x) mark.
W. D. Jarvis, N. W. M. P.

While the negotiations were in progress and the Indians were being supplied with provisions, a small herd of longhorns had been brought over, and Mr. James McKay took pleasure in driving out to the herd each morning, and shooting from his buggy as many as were required for the day, leaving the skinning and cutting up to the natives. As the herd was wild, it required good marksmanship to bring down the animals, but Mr. McKay, having had much experience in buffalo-hunting, was equal to the task.

A most useful man he was to the Governor, as he spoke Cree like a native. At Gov. Morris's request he made an address to the Indians that left no doubt whatever as to the provisions of the treaty. A few of his words will illustrate the tenor of his speech:

My Friends: I wish to make you a clear explanation of some things you do not appear to understand. The Governor has told you that we did not come here to barter or trade with you for

the land. . . . Now my experience has been that as soon as the Governor and Commissioners have turned their backs, some of you will say this thing and that thing was promised, and that the promise was not fulfilled, that you cannot rely on the Queen's representative, that even *he* will not tell the truth. While the fact is, the falsifiers are among yourselves.

Now it must be understood, and it must be in writing, all that you are promised, and I hope you will not leave till every word is understood thoroughly by you, that comes from us. . . .

We are not here to make a peace, as we would to hostile Indians, because you are the children of the Great White Queen, even as we are, and there has never been anything but peace between us. What you do not understand we will do our best to make plain to you.

We left Carlton on August 31st for Fort Pitt, arriving there September 5th, the day appointed by the Governor, though it required haste. It had not been expected that proceedings at Carlton would be so protracted.

One circumstance that cut into our time was the fact that, on leaving Fort Carlton, the Indian guide took the wrong trail, after we had crossed the Saskatchewan. I advised Dr. Jackes, whom I was driving, of this; but no heed was paid to my protest. I knew the right trail, as I had been over it before, and I knew also that the trail we were on led in the direction of Green Lake, for it was the very trail I had helped the Métis of St. Laurent to build for the Hudson Bay Company in the spring of '73.

However, as it grew dark, a message came back to me from the Governor, asking if I could set them on the right trail. I said I could, and on taking the lead, I turned off to the left, not quite at right angles but diagonally, and after about two hours' travel, hit the right trail. This we pursued for another hour, till we struck a good camping-place.

An even more hearty reception awaited our party at Fort Pitt than had been accorded at Carlton—for the Chief "Sweet Grass" and some of his Councillors threw their arms around Governor Morris, Dr. Jackes and Mr. Christie, kissing them on both cheeks. I won't swear that they liked it! The ceremonial proceedings were similar to those at Carlton. The setting was not quite so picturesque but, if anything, the display of horsemanship by the Indians was better and more daring.

The negotiations at Pitt were begun on September 7th and "Sweet Grass", one of the oldest and most respected of the Plain Cree Indians, took the leading part on behalf of his tribe. Gov. Morris made a telling speech. He stressed the protection afforded

to the Indians by the Mounted Police, afterwards very distinctly outlining the terms of the treaty, to which the braves loudly assented.

On the 9th of September, the Indians again gathered at the treaty ground, when Ku-ye-win (The Eagle) addressed them, "telling them not to be afraid to speak their minds, that the Governor was to them as a brother, that what the Queen wished to establish through him was for their good."

Old Sweet Grass again arose. His Indian name was Wee-kas-koo-kee-say-yin:

"I thank you" (he said) "for this day, for what I have seen and heard, and I also thank the Queen for sending you. I am glad of your offers and thank you from my heart. I speak this in the presence of the Divine Being. I accept of it gladly and take your hand to my heart. May this continue as long as the earth stands, and the sun shines, and the river flows.

"The great King, our Father, is looking upon us this day. He regards all the people equal with one another. He has mercy on the whole earth. He has opened a new world to us. When I hold your hands, and touch your hearts" (suited the action to the words) "let us be as one. Use your utmost to help me and my children."

It was a touching appeal, and affected all of us who were within hearing, the interpreter being very distinct in his enunciation, and using a clear, loud voice that could be heard at a distance. Other Chiefs spoke favorably. Medals and uniforms were distributed. The Police Band played *God Save the Queen*, and Mr. Christie proceeded to make the payments.

On September 13th the Chiefs came to the Fort to pay their respects, and to say Goodbye. That sly fox, "Big Bear", who alone did not sign the treaty,—though later on he gave a verbal assent—stepped up and put in his oar, citing some objections which brought from Sweet Grass the advice:

Think of our children and those to come after. There is life and succor for *them*; say yes and take his hand.

The White Fish Lake Chief said:

We have all taken it, and we think it is for our good.

Then Big Bear made a curious speech:

"Stop, stop, my friends. I've never seen the Governor before, though I've seen Mr. Christie many times. I said, when the Governor comes, I have a request to make, that he will save

my neck from what I most dread, that is: The rope to be around my neck" (hanging). "It was not given to us by the Great Spirit that the red man or the white man should shed each other's blood."

And this from the man who, nine years later, was to be foremost in the shedding of blood! His savage nature has been revealed in recent studies of those lurid times in 1885. As I remember him—and once he made a deal of trouble for Gabriel Dumont, when I was hunting in his band—Big Bear was eternally in hot water, even wanting the half-breed plainsmen to make common cause with him, and go to war with the Blackfeet!

In answer to the request made in his speech, the Governor told Big Bear that no good Indian need fear having a rope about his neck—nor any good white man, either. (Well, Big Bear escaped hanging, and only served a term in prison; whereas the lesser offenders, some of them his tools, got the rope).

The Governor then said to all: "I ask God to bless you and your children. Farewell." The Indians responded by loud ejaculations of satisfaction. Sweet Grass and the other Chiefs and councillors shook hands with him, elevating his hand towards the heavens, and invoking the blessing of the "Great Manitou". A truly impressive scene was this—never forgotten by me.

We left Fort Pitt for Battleford that 13th of September, arriving there on the 15th; but as there were only a few of the Indians present, most of them being out on the plains hunting, no treaty was made. Finally we set out from Battle River for our long trip to Fort Garry, on the 19th of September, arriving at the latter place on October 6th, having covered in all about 1800 miles. I received \$4.50 per day from Hon. James McKay for my services, together with a letter from him in which he expressed his satisfaction with the way in which I had performed my duties; also one from Dr. Jackes to the same effect. And I also was paid \$20.00 by the Governor for writing out four copies of the treaty, so that my trip was not entirely unprofitable. I was then twenty-five years old, and am now in my eighty-seventh year.

During that long journey of two weeks and three days, from Battleford to Fort Garry, summer was fast giving place to autumn. The monotonous jogtrot of our horses favoured a condition of reverie. The changes that were manifestly coming could not but be uppermost in mind. . . . And the buffalo were certainly disappearing. How would this affect my Métis friends? I thought of Gabriel. Afterwards a rebel, he was then one of the finest half-breeds in the West. The Indians had never greatly appealed to me, but

there were jewels among them, loyal Chiefs like old Crowfoot, Star Blanket, Mistowasis, and others. The tribes as a whole had some pathetically child-like characteristics, revealed in their poetic outbursts, and in the imagery that they constantly employed.

The scenes I had just witnessed—Well, if we whites had “*not* come to barter or trade for the land”—then, what exactly *were* we doing? Over a period of six years, seven treaties were made with the Indians. The provisions of the successive pacts varied slightly, but this treaty of 1876 was important on account of the extent of the territory ceded (approximately 121,000 square miles), and because of the character and size of the Indian population living within the confines of the same.

The indemnities granted the red man on submitting to the restriction laid down for him, as regards land reservations and other rights, may be read in our handbooks of history—small initial sums of money; certain equipment in tools, livestock, seed, twine for nets, ammunition and medical supplies; promises of educational aid; and \$5 annual cash payment per head, with \$25 to each chief, and \$15 to each headman or councillor (not to exceed four to a band). Shall we ask ourselves—*Was it enough?*

The Commissioners complain, in one case, that “the negotiations were difficult and protracted”; in another, that “it took five tedious days”; in another, “we had great difficulty owing to the excessive demands of the Indians.”

Difficult negotiations, excessive demands.

There are many aspects to this question: “Did the Red Man Get a Square Deal?” My own opinion is perhaps of little consequence. I am but a scribe who can recall these scenes from actual experience. But the words “For whosoever hath, to him shall be given,”—one of the “hard sayings” of Scripture—seem applicable here.

Anyone who has been present at “Treaty Days” in the West, especially in long-past decades, or has seen the sad influence upon the “bloods” of bad habits in the white population, has some inkling of the tragic impact upon the native Indian of “white” supremacy.

However, there are inspiring passages that brighten the whole refrain. One of these is the part played by scores of faithful missionaries in their efforts to Christianize the Indians. Let us leave the subject on this cheerful note.