

Writing the Stories of Aboriginal-Missionary Encounters: A Place in our Minds for Them All

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The history of Aboriginal-missionary relations, including those with Mennonites, is a topic that needs to be developed not only in general terms but also through the microcosms of detailed, community-based research. At the same time, we know that inevitably scholars pursue their studies within broader historical, cultural, and religious frameworks and contexts that they have, for better or worse, inherited from others. At the outset of this discussion, therefore, it seems useful to look at some of those frames and contexts, and then to consider a few ways of building upon and going beyond these legacies. Legacies enrich their legatees, but they also may impose conditions and terms of reference that constrain their recipients in various ways.

The first and richest legacy in this context is the vast literature on missions and missionaries that we have inherited from many Christian denominations over the last few centuries. Anyone who looks at these books and periodicals today is quickly struck by their heroic, celebratory tone. Most such works are hagiographies, a genre that has its roots in telling the stories of the holy lives of saints. Manitoba history has its own examples, most strikingly in the numerous books written about the Rev. James Evans, who founded the Methodist mission of Rossville at Norway House in 1840. Evans was a hero to authors ranging from fellow

clergymen Egerton R. Young and John Maclean down to Nan Shipley, not only for his achievements but for his battles with the Hudson's Bay Company over Sunday work and travel, even though his tenure ended in 1846 under the dark cloud of a church trial resulting from allegations of immoral behavior. Only recently have we begun to reach a deeper understanding of the complex crosscurrents swirling under the laudatory prose of his biographers. [For a review of the literature, including some of the latest work on the topic, see Shirritt-Beaumont 2001].

Hagiographic writing about missions and missionaries reached a peak in the late 1800s and early 1900s, as churches marked the progress of missions in various parts of the world, and as they tried to raise funds for further mission work. Clergymen and returned missionaries wrote books about these heroic ventures and sold them on lecture tours, and Sunday school teachers gave copies as prizes to their best students. Used with care, these works are useful historical sources. But they must be read in context, with attention to their purpose and intended audiences. Actually, they were largely promotional, often printed by church printing houses and written to inspire the young and encourage the converted.

Christian hagiographic writing of recent centuries is, however, not the only legacy we need to consider. While the churches were seeking to save souls, popular culture developed its own reverse form of hagiography from the mid-1800s on, countering the churches' aims in ways that surely bemused many Aboriginal people. Once the "Indian problem" was seen to be under control on the western frontiers of North America, popular and literary writers could safely romanticize and idealize Native people as a vanishing race, an object of pity and nostalgia, and often a means to critique their own so-called civilization. [For overviews, see Francis 1992 and Deloria 1998.] Longfellow's epic poem "*Hiawatha*" (which transferred the name of an Iroquois cultural hero into a Great Lakes Algonquian setting), the novels of James Fenimore Cooper; and later the poetry of Canadian Indian Affairs superintendent Duncan Campbell Scott, are only a few instances of this huge literature. This idealizing trend was also manifest on the entertainment stages of North America and Europe, where performers such as E. Pauline Johnson and Molly Spotted Elk fostered images of the Indian princess, beautiful and exotic, while Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show assembled once feared leaders such as Sitting Bull and domesticated them into noble Indian chiefs [Strong-Boag and Gerson 2000, McBride 1995, Brooklyn Museum 1981]. Movies throughout the twentieth century played on the themes of Indians as either nature's nobility or wild savages, or a combination of both. *Dances with Wolves*, although sophisticated in some ways, still evoked noble/savage Indian images in its portrayal of the gentle Sioux versus the fierce Pawnee. And Disney's *Pocahontas*, ahistorical in its treatment of both the Powhatans and the English [compare, for example, Gleach 1996], built on a long history of romantic Indian princesses.

We also have such phenomena as Black Elk, whom poet John Neihardt movingly presented in the 1930s as a great Sioux holy man while bypassing his subject's decades of service as a Roman Catholic catechist [DeMallie 1984]; and the mid-nineteenth-century Chief Seattle, whose name is attached to a famous ecological speech widely invoked by environmentalists, yet which Texas English professor Ted Pery in fact manufactured in the early 1970s on the basis of very slim evidence [Kaiser 1987]. The descendants of such reverse hagiographic constructions as these flourish and multiply in the New Age section of every bookstore. They usually tell us very little about real Aboriginal people; instead, they tell

us as much or more about their authors and about the popular culture and stereotypes that resonate through these works. [Deloria 1998: 170-174]

To help us see through these smokescreens, we have a third legacy, more recent and still growing. I refer to a century of secular scholarship which we may both build upon and critique, for it certainly is not free of problems. Scholars, of course, have varied widely in their outlooks, and may be as partisan or narrow in their perspectives as anyone else, and secularism can itself be a kind of religion. But we can learn much from these sources, as from others. Here I wish to draw attention to two highlights of this literature: first, the rise of the concept of acculturation in the 1930s to the 1960s; and secondly, in later decades the rising emphasis on Native agency and resistance as key factors in interactions with outsiders, and with Christianity in particular.

Beginning in the 1930s, anthropologists tried to improve their theoretical and research base to help them conceptualize and understand the vast changes and enormous pressures to which Aboriginal peoples had been and were being subjected. Acculturation was the new buzzword. For about thirty years acculturation studies flourished as they examined how indigenous peoples had taken on new technologies and values, and how they had adapted (or not) to change and loss. Underlying assumptions often included the notion of a baseline of "original" and pure culture, static or slowly changing, which people were leaving behind at a high rate of speed as they adopted new ways and mixed together the old and the new. A. Irving Hallowell, for example, compared the "Inland" and "Lakeside" Berens River Ojibwa of northwestern Ontario and Manitoba with their congeners at Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin, and placed them along a continuum from the almost untouched northern inlanders to the highly acculturated and more dysfunctional Flambeau people. On an individual level, Hallowell viewed his key collaborator, William Berens, chief of the lakeside community of Berens River, as moderately acculturated, being a Methodist and bilingual, and showing (so he thought for a time) some inner conflicts of personality and identity (Hallowell 1955: Part IV; Brown 1989).

Acculturation studies were often flawed in various ways. They tended to assume progressive and irreversible loss and replacement. New ways were seen as displacing the old rather than as complementing or even possibly reinforcing them. Anthropology has also been influenced, more than it may like to admit, by some profound Judeo-Christian subtexts. Christianity has usually been exclusivist and dualistic: you are either Christian or pagan; you are converted (literally turned around) and saved, or not. Secular scholars, like their popular counterparts mentioned earlier, have often seemed to assimilate this oppositional dogma; they have simply reversed the positive and negative poles. In their search for traditional cultures, they have been dismissive of those touched by Christian missions. In this scheme, Native Christians become the losers in more ways than one by being defined as acculturated and deprived of their culture, values, and identity, and thus, by implication, devalued as sources of knowledge and as "real Indians" despite the complexities of their experience and the depth of their theology. [For studies that counter such images see Stevenson 1996 on Charles Pratt, and Matthews and Roulette 1996 on Charlie George Owen of Pauingassi, Manitoba.]

Since the 1960s, a rather more sophisticated literature has been developed to critique simplistic constructs of mission converts, whether presented by mission advocates or schol-

ars. This literature also offers an alternative to the romantic images of the popular media and of recent New Age spiritual movements. At their best, historians such as John Webster Grant, James Axtell, and James Ronda, and anthropologists such as Ann Fienup-Riordan and Jean-Guy Goulet (to name a few) have treated the people on both sides of Aboriginal-missionary encounters as real and complex persons and communities, and have tried to understand the dynamics of these relationships more profoundly. In particular, they have paid attention to Aboriginal agency, responses, and resistance.

The titles of some of their works illustrate their points. When John Webster Grant published his comprehensive history *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (1984), he called one chapter “A Yes that Means No.” Similarly, James Ronda (1977) published an important article about Jesuit mission work in New France, entitled “We Are Well as we Are.” Both authors were drawing attention to a classic Native response pattern to missionary discourse. People listened politely and did not speak much; if they rebuked the interventions of the outsiders, they did so gently. They showed by action or inaction, not by vocal assent or dissent, whether they would follow the missionary’s lead or not; and they empirically assessed the likely returns, spiritual or other, from doing so [see also Axtell 1988: 107]. A work by Ann Fienup-Riordan on Alaskan Yup’ik Eskimo experiences with missionizing (1991), sets a new standard for missionary biography. Translating in her title *The Real People and the Children of Thunder* the Yup’ik terms of reference for themselves and the noisier outsiders, she deals seriously with the complexities of interaction and response on both sides. Similarly, Jean-Guy Goulet, in *Ways of Knowing: Experience, Knowledge, and Power among the Dene Tha* (1998), sensitively explores the Dene Tha’s assimilation of Roman Catholicism into a belief system that continues to incorporate animal helpers, visions, and reincarnation. In a similar vein, when I reviewed A.I. Hallowell’s papers to learn more about his collaborator, William Berens, I found it most useful not to place Berens somewhere on an acculturational gradient, but rather to see his life as governed by a strong piece of advice given to him by his father, Jacob. As William reported to Hallowell, Jacob Berens cautioned him: “Don’t think you know everything. You will see many new things in your life, and you will find a place in your mind for them all.” [Brown 1989: 210]

I now want to look beyond legacies, beyond what has been said and written in the past, and express a few thoughts that we might keep in mind for the future. First, I commend Jacob Berens’ advice to all of us. It points to an outlook that contrasts sharply with Christian exclusivism and truth claims. It exhibits, instead, an inclusive attitude that has a long history in Aboriginal spiritual values and practice; briefly, it might be described as a “both/and” ethos rather than “either/or.” Accounts of older encounters between Aboriginal people and outsiders often pointed to openness and sharing. Fur traders—for example, George Nelson and David Thompson—were often adopted and welcomed at ceremonies. Some experienced the powers of the Cree and Ojibwa Shaking Tent, and those who learned a Native language were taught a great deal if they opened their minds and took the time to listen. [For examples, see Brown and Brightman 1988; Warkentin 1993.]

These relatively open communications began to break down when missionaries presented their scriptures and creeds as the only truth and had no place in their minds for what their hosts tried to tell them. Yet even in mission contexts, Native inclusivism could flourish as

people borrowed from the newcomers ideas and practices that seemed to have power and relevance. The most striking example in northern Manitoba and Ontario is the indigenizing of the Cree syllabic writing system developed by James Evans at Norway House in the early 1840s. Largely through the efforts of two Cree prophets (whom the missionaries saw as heretics because they adapted Christian ideas to their own frames of reference), syllabic writing spread like wildfire west and south of Hudson Bay, to the extent that one scholar has claimed the Cree of the 1850s had a higher literacy rate in syllabics than did contemporary eastern Canadian settlers in the English alphabet. [Brown 1988; McCarthy cited in Warkentin 1999: 16] Syllabics have become, and remain, the people's own writing system for their own languages, in those communities where Aboriginal languages still flourish.

The mention of languages brings me to the final topic I would like to touch on in this paper. If our historical discussions are truly to reach deeper understandings of communication issues in Aboriginal encounters with Christianity, past and present, we must take more account of language and translation issues, as Maria Campbell, for example, so vividly shows us elsewhere in this issue with reference to the loss of place names. In a communications sense, the English language is noisy. It is drowning out other languages in several parts of the world and certainly in North America, and this fact has philosophical and theological as well as cultural implications. All Aboriginal languages are at risk, even Navajo with over 100,000 speakers, if we look at what has been happening to them in the last 20-30 years. As of 1984, 53 different Native languages were still spoken in Canada. The number is lower now. For example, Angela Sidney, the storyteller featured in Julie Cruikshank's major book on Yukon storytellers (1990), who died a few years ago, was the last speaker of the Athapascan Tagish language. Only three Canadian Native languages, Cree, Ojibwe, and Inuktitut, have enough speakers to ensure their survival for the present. But all have been losing ground. In North America overall, 209 Native languages were spoken as of 1995; but only 46 of those were still spoken by large numbers of children. Ninety-one were spoken by adults but by very few children, a factor greatly speeding their decline. Seventy-two were spoken by only a few old people; and 120 had become extinct. [Goddard 1996: 3]

Why should this matter? One can most assuredly be Cree or Ojibwa (or Scottish or Ukrainian) without speaking the language of one's ancestors. But languages encode categories, concepts, and world views. To study another language, as Mennonites surely found in their migrations, is to learn about different structures of speech and thought, different ways of knitting the world together, and sometimes to become aware of the unconscious biases embedded in one's own language. One example may serve. In Ojibwe there are, in linguistic terms, two genders, animate and inanimate. Every noun is marked grammatically by its ending as one or the other, and animate nouns and pronouns, unlike English, do not have to be categorized as masculine or feminine. In Ojibwe, then, words for god, or Great Spirit, or the Creator (*manidoo*, *gichi-manidoo*) are, as it were, above or beyond being male or female, and Native speakers do not have to debate whether God is man or woman. In English we have no such luxury; we must choose He or She, Him or Her. I could go further on the amazing nuances of Ojibwe verbs; linguist Roger Roulette has told me that if a fluent elder speaker of Ojibwe conjugated every possible form of an Ojibwe verb, the list would run to 5,000 words.

The point is to ask what both Aboriginal communities and outsiders lose, what we don't

learn, and what we drown out when we build spiritual bridges (and express the histories of those bridges) only in the dominant language. If we do that, the bridge traffic travels only one way, and we can't even see or hear the insights we might have gained from two-way traffic. When Maureen Matthews and I became interested in the community of Pauingassi, Manitoba, one of the places A.I. Hallowell visited in the 1930s, the first people we met there were Ojibwe Mennonites, largely monolingual in their own language, who were steeped in their history and culture. They were Mennonites because Henry Neufeld had worked and taught there from 1955 to 1970 at their invitation. [See Block elsewhere in this issue] He helped them profoundly and continues to do so, and the school he set up was in their language, adapting Cree syllabics to the Ojibwe that they speak. They were fortunate that he and not Indian Affairs set up the first school; thanks in good part to his knowledge of and respect for the language, Pauingassi still has one of the highest language retention rates around. Yet when the federal department of Indian Affairs began to support the school, its officials insisted on the use of English. The current school is a dominantly English-language enclave surrounded by a community in various states of crisis.

Ojibwe or other Aboriginal languages may not by themselves save communities, and most of us will never learn them. However, especially in its higher forms as carried in the older people's heads, language is a treasure-house of heritage and culture, as well as a vehicle for deepened communication if we can only set the stage for such interactions and give them highest priority. Some missionaries, Mennonite and others, have known this, and their dictionaries and grammars are among our most important linguistic documents. But language losses, and particularly the loss of speakers of high fluency, are endemic and accelerating. Historically minded people from all sides need to collaborate and listen to one another intensively if the full stories of spiritual encounters between Aboriginal people and newcomers are to be set down. We need to record the perspectives of all involved, in their own words, and in their own languages where possible.

The stories of Aboriginal/Christian encounters will keep being rewritten and retold as the dynamics of these encounters continue to resonate in our lives. There is new ground to explore and to ponder and my hope is that we may do so in the spirit of Jacob Berens' advice to his son William. Let us never think we know everything, but let us learn many new things and find a place in our minds for them all.

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