

# Strengthening Relationships

***Dedicated to Bill Clapperton and to the Dene people of Cold Lake***



EMBEDDED IN THE NAMES OF THE “trails” Albertans travel every day—“Yellowhead” in Edmonton, “Crowchild” and “Deerfoot” in Calgary, “Whoop-Up” in Lethbridge—are reminders that Alberta’s early history is the history of the

Plains and Northern Indians. Fred Stenson’s *The Trade* and Rudy Wiebe’s *The Temptations of Big Bear* explain the origins of the present relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Albertans.

In the early days the relationship was reciprocal: natives traded furs and buffalo meat for tools, blankets and firearms. The indigenous people were free and self-governing and knew how to survive in this land. They could show the newcomers routes through the wilderness and where to find food. Many fur traders had Indian wives who helped them immeasurably as translators and guides.

With the disappearance of the buffalo in the 1870s came mass starvation for natives who were then thrown on the “mercies” of the Canadian government. Indians signed treaties in exchange for support. Treaties 6, 7 and 8, covering most of Alberta, were signed in 1876, 1877 and 1899 respectively. Indians were relegated to reserves, which were often remote, isolated and inadequate to support life. Under the Indian Act, 1876, native people were denied virtually all rights and treated as wards. In 1885, after the North West Rebellion, the “pass law” required an Indian to receive his agent’s permission in writing to leave his reserve.

The federal government was reluctant to provide adequate funding for the economic, educational, social and health needs of Indians on reserves. The goal of official policy was assimilation. To gain the rights of a Canadian citizen, a native had to forgo Indian status and his or her land base on the reserve. Not until 1960 were status Indians given the right to vote. Understandably, Indians regarded citizenship with a certain skepticism.

As a solution to the problems native people faced, and to assert the equality of all citizens, Trudeau’s 1969 White Paper proposed the repeal of the Indian Act and the end of treaty agreements, thereby abolishing reserves and integrating aboriginals into the mainstream. This proposal did not take into account what Indians wanted.

By that time reserves had become “the material and psychological security of Indians.” The Indian Association

of Alberta under the leadership of Harold Cardinal vigorously opposed the White Paper. “After a century of being engulfed by a white tidal wave, they were still here, they were still different, and they were not about to let themselves be pushed into oblivion,” wrote Rudy Platiel at the time in the *Indian-Eskimo Association of Canada Bulletin*.

The 1982 Constitution Act recognized “existing aboriginal and treaty rights of aboriginal people in Canada,” thus affirming their special group status—and creating an industry for lawyers to determine exactly what those rights and entitlements are. The *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* in 1996 asserted the inherent right of self government of aboriginal peoples and recommended that distinct aboriginal groups assume the status of nations. Bands have been relabelled as “first nations”—collectively the Assembly of First Nations—with whom negotiations are to be carried on as with a parallel government.

In the “Public Debate” section of this issue, Tom Flanagan (no relation) and Sharon Venne present clashing views on the relationship of indigenous peoples to the rest of Canada. Our purpose is not to polarize and solidify oppositions but to encourage discussion of this issue. Al Cairns in *Citizens Plus* suggests a status for Indians which recognizes their unique place as a founding people of Canada with full citizenship and “certain additional rights as charter members of the Canadian community.” He believes that only as citizens of the same nation can we generate the fellow feeling and concern for each other needed to improve conditions for aboriginal people.

Both aboriginal and non-aboriginal people in Alberta now share a history. The contributions of former lieutenant-governor Ralph Steinhauer, writer Marilyn Dumont, artist Alex Janvier, architect Douglas Cardinal and many others are part of our shared culture. We share the same community—literally, in that fully half of Alberta’s 164,835 aboriginal people (1996 census) now live in cities: 35,195 in Edmonton and 23,560 in Calgary alone. As citizens we can recognize distinctiveness without being strangers indifferent to each other’s well-being. Métis spokesperson David Courchene says, “Distinctiveness isn’t something that should divide us. We have to learn to value it and realize people of all cultures have something to offer.”

*Jackie Flanagan*