

REVIEW ARTICLE

TWO FROM THE ISLAND: RECENT WORK RELATING TO THE MICMACS OF PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

Alan Andrew MacEachern: Theophilus Stewart and the Plight of the Micmac. *The Island Magazine*, 28:3-11 (Fall/Winter), 1990.

M.Olga McKenna: *Micmac by Choice: Elsie Sark, an Island Legend*. Halifax: Formac Publishing Limited, 1990; 175 pp, bibliography, index.

In Prince Edward Island, there are roughly 650 status Indians organized into two Bands and living on four reserves. There are, probably, a further 570 non-status Indians in the province. Thus, roughly one percent of the province's population is Aboriginal. Except for anthropological work, little academic attention has been paid to either the history or contemporary circumstances of these citizens. The major historical work was done by L.F.S. Upton and published in *Acadiensis* (Upton, 1976) and as Chapter Eight in his major monograph on Micmac-Colonist relations (1979). Upton also published a small piece in *The Island Magazine* on "Thomas Irwin: Champion of the Micmacs" (1977)¹. On the post-Confederation period, there is an even smaller opus concerning Island Aboriginal people. Occasionally a publication on a general topic contains useful insights into Indian-White relations or into some aspect of public policy, but even these are rare.²

If we turn to the more general academic literature on Prince Edward Island, the Micmac are almost impossible to find. Both the standard popular history of the province (Baldwin, 1990) and the most widely read students' history (Bolger, 1973) adopt the traditional history-text approach to Aboriginal peoples: only in the 'pirates and pathfinders' chapters at the beginning of the books is any mention of them found.³ The standard, and generally very good, account of modern Island society makes no mention of the Aboriginal peoples at all (Smitheram et al., 1982).

Even if we turn to unpublished and journalistic sources we find little attention paid to Island Indians. Of the former, there is one report on the socio-economic conditions on the Lennox Island reserve, done for the Indian Affairs Branch in 1969 (Gross, 1969), and one general review of contemporary issues relating to Aboriginal peoples in Canada, done for the Prince Edward Island Minister of Justice in 1989 (Crossley, 1989). The popular press has generally ignored Island Natives. However, recently one of the province's monthly news magazines, *Islandside*, has published two articles, one on the Micmac language and another on contemporary

political concerns (Tucker, 1989; Sark, 1990).

Thus, there are few useful works dealing with Aboriginal peoples in Prince Edward Island. The two works produced in 1990—one article and one book—improve the situation only in small ways. Because both are based upon good research, some specialists in Native Studies will find some small grist for their particular mills, but such utility will be accidental. Alan MacEachern's article perpetuates two problems with the way Island academics approach Native peoples and issues. First, it continues the fascination with—perhaps fixation on—pre-Confederation Native-White relations, especially when those relations touch upon the famous Prince Edward Island land question. Second, the article is written as if there was no general literature on Native-White relations or Aboriginal policies in Canada. Opportunities to draw comparison, to learn from experiences in similar jurisdictions, or to offer lessons on broad historical issues are generally ignored. The usefulness of Sister Olga McKenna's biography of Elsie Sark is limited only by the second problem. Indeed, in places she offers intriguing insights into twentieth century life on the Lennox Island reserve; the reader is frustrated by the fact that she seems entirely unaware of these insights herself.⁴

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Alan Andrew MacEachern is a doctoral candidate in history at Queen's University. His paper on Theophilus Stewart was initially written as his undergraduate honours essay in history at the University of Prince Edward Island. It is based upon solid archival research, is well organized, and is clearly and interestingly written. The high editorial and historiographic standards of *The Island Magazine* are reflected in the article. The basic story of Stewart is told well, and scholars with an interest in this period of Indian-White relations will find this a pleasant small piece.

The subject of MacEachern's piece is interesting. Theophilus Stewart was one of two Indian Commissioners appointed in the mid-1850s. While the main task of the Commissioners was to administer relief, after the passage of an Indian Act in 1856 they also administered lands reserved for Indians. In practice, this latter function was irrelevant since the method of settlement in Prince Edward Island had not made allowance for Indians. In 1767 the Island had been divided into sixty-six lots by the British government and the lots were distributed among a number of British proprietors, most of whom were absentee landlords. For over a century after this grand sub-division, Island politics and history were dominated by the efforts of tenants to acquire full ownership rights. In the midst of the general 'land question' the rights of the Micmac were ignored. There was no Crown land to reserve for the Indians and the settlers were distinctly

unsympathetic to the plight of the Micmac. Theophilus Stewart, however, regularly pressured the legislature for money for relief, often overspent his relief allowance, and was instrumental in convincing the Aborigines Protection Society in London to purchase Lennox Island for the Micmac (see also McMahon, 1988). The legislature had little interest in developing an Indian policy, but it is unlikely that they would have funded even the ad hoc policy of relief of poverty without Stewart's pressure.

The story of Theophilus Stewart is important for a couple of related reasons. First, he is a fine example of the paternalism which dominated the colonial policy of Britain in the 1830s, '40s and '50s and which profoundly influenced the development of Canadian Indian policy. These were, after all, significant years in the history of Indian policy. They were the decades when the 'Indian problem' was redefined, becoming less a problem of military and settlement policy and more a problem of reconstructing the Indians themselves (Crossley, 1987). It is important to recognize that this debate occurred in Prince Edward Island and that people there were motivated by the moral imperatives of British imperialism. However, the real importance of Stewart's story may lie in his uniqueness in Prince Edward Island. For all of his zeal and effort, Stewart was not able to hold the attention of the legislature or his fellow citizens long enough to effect any permanent change. MacEachern's article makes repeated reference to the reluctance of the legislature to treat Indians or Indian policy seriously. For example, when Stewart overspent on relief and his fellow Commissioner publicly criticized him for this, "they were neither dismissed nor reprimanded; the legislature simply chose to ignore them" (MacEachern, 1990:8) The establishment of the main reserve in the province depended on private benevolence, and a lasting Indian policy was not introduced until after the Prince Edward Island Micmac became subject to Dominion Indian policy in 1873.

MacEachern's article provides some evidence that might help explain the different patterns of development of Indian policy in the various British North American colonies before Confederation. This is an area much in need of analysis, but such analysis must build upon careful explanations of each colony's policies. At the very least MacEachern's article supports the hypothesis that the dependence upon local legislatures for support and funding during the development of assimilationist Indian policies very likely doomed those policies. Only in Upper Canada, where the Indian Department had an independent source of funds from the sale of Indian lands, was the executive able to translate assimilationist theory into administration fairly completely. In colonies like Prince Edward Island, ad hoc actions and superficial commitments to administration characterized Indian policy (Crossley, 1987).

Olga McKenna is Professor Emeritus, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, where she taught history and philosophy of education for many years. Her biography of Elsie Sark (1892-1973) is nicely researched, especially the chapters dealing with Sark's early life in England. The style shows clearly McKenna's huge admiration for Sark, and is occasionally overly sentimental. However, the book is aimed at a general audience, and is easily read. It supplies a bibliography and index that will be of use to academic readers.

The subject of McKenna's book was not a Micmac, although she was a status Indian due to the operation of the Indian Act. Elsie Sark was born Elsie Houghton in 1892 in England. She met and married John J. Sark during the Great War, when Sark was serving with the Canadian army and stationed in England. In 1918 she settled with her husband on the Lennox Island reserve, and lived there until her death in 1973. John Sark died in 1945.

McKenna's focus is very much on Elsie Sark, who was, indeed, a remarkable person. However, in telling Elsie's story, McKenna necessarily provides several glimpses and occasional insights into reserve life on Prince Edward Island during much of the twentieth century. This makes this book useful to specialists in Native Studies, in a tangential sort of way.

Most of the interesting glimpses into life on Lennox Island during the twentieth century come very much in passing. Thus, we learn that in the 1920s, John Sark, who was teaching in the local school, "used Micmac as a language of instruction, even after being admonished by federal authorities to use English only in the classroom..." (McKenna, 1990:75). This passing comment hints at some very interesting attitudes among both the Micmac and Indian Affairs officials, but is not developed. Similarly, McKenna tells us that in Elsie Sark's view the 1951 Indian Act led to major changes in Indian administration on Lennox Island.

However, her explanation of these changes is quite unsatisfactory. She claims that the 1951 Act "introduced policies that were paternalistic by their very nature...Basically, these policies were directed to the assimilation of the Indians into the larger Canadian society" (McKenna, 1990:141). However, given the essential similarities between the 1951 and 1880 Acts, and the constancy of paternalism and assimilationist goals from the early nineteenth century, this seems a terrible over-simplification. One suspects that Elsie Sark and Olga McKenna were noticing the introduction of the tools of the welfare state into the traditional paternalism of Canadian Indian policy, but the matter certainly needs further exploration.

A final example of an intriguing passing reference comes toward the end of the book, where McKenna argues that the Lennox Island community experienced a significant decline after 1960 (pp. 152-53). This, it is argued, was the beginning of problems relating to alcohol abuse, chronic unemployment and underemployment, and dependence upon

government programs. Here I suspect McKenna is giving some other researcher a broad hint about a period of Lennox Island life that very much needs examination.

The two chapters that are most interesting from the perspective of Native Studies are Six, "The Lennox Island Reserve: 1918", and Nine, "The Politics of Mistrust". The former provides a rare snapshot depicting life in this isolated community at the end of the age of imperialism. Three aspects of this life stand out: one is the extent to which the community relied upon traditional economic pursuits; the second is the importance of the Roman Catholic Church to all aspects of community life at that time; and the third is the value placed upon education by many residents of the reserve. "The Politics of Mistrust" outlines-too briefly and incompletely-the politics surrounding Band elections and government on Lennox Island. McKenna takes the story back to 1859, when the Sark family became dominant in local politics due to recognition by the government of the colonizing society. She then traces splits within the reserve community, alluding to periodic actions by the Department of Indian Affairs. The story is told in only a few paragraphs within the chapter, but it is one of only a few accounts of reserve politics in the general literature.

None of the hints or insights mentioned above are developed by McKenna. Again, this is not surprising as it was not her purpose to advance scholarship in Native Studies. Still, some awareness of the broader literature on Canadian Indians and Indian-White relations would have made the book more useful. As it stands, Native Studies experts will be quite frustrated if they read this book.

These two works, then, have only limited utility. Anyone interested in the development of Indian policy during the mid-nineteenth century will find MacEachern's article of at least some interest. However, Native Studies scholars will have to be very interested in gleaning small and scattered grains before they purchase McKenna's book. Meanwhile, academia in 1990 did little to advance our overall understanding of Native peoples, Native-White relations, or Native policy in Prince Edward Island. The challenge for Island historians and social scientists is to move beyond their fascination with the unusual individuals and the pre-Confederation period and begin to recreate and explain the ordinary lot of Aboriginal peoples and the development of every-day policy and administration.

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NOTES

1. Irwin was an Irish emigrant who, seeing parallels between English treatment of this native country and British treatment of Micmacs, devoted himself to the Micmac cause. He was particularly concerned with preserving the Micmac language.
2. Indeed, the only one that comes readily to hand is Richard Bartlett's *Indian Reserves in the Atlantic Provinces of Canada*, which contains three pages devoted to Prince Edward Island.
3. This, of course, implies that there used to be interesting and quaintly different people here, but they are not here any longer. This is surely one of the best examples of the role of the history profession in making the Indians irrelevant to the dominant society, a role apparently still being played for the benefit of the current generation of island students.
4. Of course, these criticisms are ultimately unfair. Neither MacEachern nor McKenna intended their work for a Native Studies audience so it should not be surprising that they did not produce the type of manuscripts that I would have produced were I in possession of their empirical knowledge and research. Still, their work might well be read and used by specialists in Native Studies, and this justifies, at least in part, this unfairness.

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