# IMAGES OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA CANADIAN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

**ABSTRACT**

This article examines British Columbia history textbooks over time for their changing representations of Aboriginal people. It also discusses implications for instruction.



**British Columbia Schools Magazine, Vol. 1 (February 1946), p. 43. Permission for use granted from BC Archives.**

This compelling photograph appeared in *British Columbia Schools* magazine in February of 1946. It was intended to provide an example of progressive education in action in British Columbia schools: child-centered, cooperative activities, resulting in a tangible product; in this case, an Aboriginal village. However, what may be most striking to a contemporary viewer is the perspective on Aboriginal people that is portrayed.

The primary-grade children are posed proudly around a model they have presumably made. One is wearing a ring of construction paper "feathers" on her head. Another has a bow and arrows. The caption reads:

> Indians, Indians tall and red,
> With arrows and spears of very sharp head,
> Dressed in fine feathers . . .
> Miss Rita Boyer's class at Westridge School No. 2 really learned how Indians lived.[1]

We can only speculate about what these students *really* learned about Indians from the evidence in the photograph. What jumps off the page is an assumption that Indians existed only in the past and are not part of the world in which these children live. It is particularly interesting to note the "fine feathers" adorning the little girl's head. It is to be hoped the students were not learning about Aboriginal people living in what is now British Columbia, because most did not wear feathers.[2]

What is also interesting is that this classroom scene from the 1940s is both suggestive of the 1970s Canadian multicultural "Celebrate Our Differences" approach and perhaps not so different from what we might see displayed in an elementary school classroom today. With its focus on the material culture of the past, this approach overlooks the impact of European colonization on Aboriginal people. It is a benign and safe approach that allows us to distance ourselves and our students from the residual injustices and inequities of colonialism.

PENNEY CLARK

Penney Clark is a faculty member in the Department of Curriculum Studies, University of British Columbia.

This investigation uses a series of "snapshots." The first illuminates eighteen textbooks published before mid-twentieth century, when Aboriginal activism was slight, their population was small, and they were largely assigned to reserves. The second snapshot draws from findings of Canadian studies conducted from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, under the auspices of various organizations, such as provincial human rights commissions, provincial departments of education, and Aboriginal organizations. Canadian history texts were under intense scrutiny for their representation of various societal groups, but particularly Aboriginal people, during these two decades, and it was a period of increased Aboriginal activism. In the third period, the 1990s to present, I examined twenty-six textbooks, comprising all of the Canadian history texts authorized in British Columbia in the period. One might expect to see increased tolerance in textbooks in this period, as a result of both changing attitudes in the broader society and the previous period of scrutiny.[3]

## Aboriginal Person as "Other": To Mid Twentieth Century

Two predominant attitudes toward Aboriginal people are prevalent: paternalism and repugnance. Jacques Cartier "scattered among them glass beads, combs and other trinkets for which they scrambled like eager children."[4] They sometimes went without food because "they were very improvident children."[5] "The Hudson's Bay Company was a wise father to them."[6] They were "almost child-like in their simplicity."[7] The poem "Who Calls?" epitomizes this paternalistic attitude:

> Who calls?
> The Red man, poor and sick,
> He calls.
> Who comes?
> The White man, rich and strong,
> He comes.[8]

The Métis resistances were based on an unfortunate misunderstanding. *The Romance of the Prairie Provinces* says, "No one explained to them [the Métis] that Canada intended to treat them fairly."[9] The Métis "thought [union with Canada] meant the coming of settlers, the decrease of game, and the imposition of taxes. Canadian surveyors were already at work running lines through their settlements and the ignorant occupants feared that the loss of their lands would follow."[10] A lot of unnecessary fuss could have been avoided if someone had only explained to these "ignorant occupants" that Canada intended to treat them fairly and that union with Canada would not mean the coming of settlers, the decrease of game, and the imposition of taxes.

Repugnance is evident in phrases such as "like veritable demons,"[11] "worthless Indian,"[12] "unreasonable savages,"[13] "savage hearts,"[14] "blood-thirsty nature,"[15] "ignorant savages,"[16] and "savages stood round in gaping wonder."[17] Living with Aboriginal people qualified white men for sainthood: "Worse than travelling with the Indians was living with them. Only beasts or saints could survive being cooped up in a birch-bark hut with unclean savages, half-tamed dogs, and myriads of fleas, eating filthy food, and having their eyes continually blinded by smoke. These missionaries were heroic saints."[18]

Robert F. Berkhofer, in *The White Man's Indian*, maintains that the image of the Indian as "savage" was essential for justification of both imperialist and evangelical goals. He argues that "not only did the image of the savage Indian rationalize European conquest but it also spurred missionaries to greater zeal and their patrons to larger contributions."[19] Imperialism became an altruistic endeavour.

## The Turbulent Decades: Mid-1960s to Mid-1980s

As newspaper headlines such as "Slanted Textbooks"[20] attest, there was a great deal of public interest in the mid-1960s in textbook representations of marginalized groups. The subsequent studies found errors of fact, glaring omissions, and negative stereotyping in Aboriginal representations. I will highlight only a few of these studies.[21]

It was Aboriginal people themselves who first pointed to their negative representations in textbooks. A 1964 study initiated at the Indian and Métis Conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba, concluded Aboriginals were either ignored or presented in a derogatory fashion as "fierce and predatory savages; [or] as simple and innocent sub-humans."[22] The texts emphasized drinking, gambling, and fighting as habits of Indians and not of white people. One book mentioned that all tribes had probably lived in Alaska at some point over the course of wandering about North America. This experience "deadened their minds; it killed their imagination and initiative."[23]

*Teaching Prejudice* (1971), by Garnet McDiarmid and David Pratt, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, analyzed 143 social studies textbooks for their representations

of various groups. This study, which took on iconic status in Canada, concluded that:

Indians emerged as the least favoured of all the groups. An overwhelming number of them were portrayed as primitive and unskilled; not infrequently they were shown as aggressive and hostile as well. Although most have worn western dress for generations, 95 percent were shown in tribal dress or only partly clothed. In 86 percent of the illustrations, one or more Indian males were shown wearing feathers or feathered headdresses... *none* were shown in skilled or professional occupations.[24]

The Manitoba Indian Brotherhood, in *The Shocking Truth About Indians in Textbooks*, found "the main failure of the textbooks under review is their tendency to treat the Native as an impediment to be removed so that the goals of European 'progress' can be realized... ."[25] Other studies at this time added support for these findings. Aboriginal people were presented in a negative light, savage and warlike in the early years of European settlement and mostly absent in later years.[26]

### Prevailing Images: 1990s to Present

It is reasonable to say that a transformation has taken place in the ways Canadian history textbooks depict Aboriginal people. They have more of a presence in the texts and are depicted in more positive, albeit still limited ways. Textbooks now discuss life on reserves, land claims negotiations, treaty rights, and Native self-government, among other issues.

It is also reasonable to say that the texts have not come far enough in facilitating understanding that abuses are carried out through institutional practices and have legacies within collective identities. For example, they may now acknowledge that Aboriginal people assisted European explorers and colonists but fail to acknowledge the colonial relationships of power in which such interactions occurred.

Aboriginal people seem to be depicted in six ways: spectator, savage warrior, invisible, exotic, problem, uniquely spiritual, and protestor. I will discuss two of these here: invisible and uniquely spiritual.

It is standard practice for Canadian history textbooks to discuss the ways in which Aboriginal cultural groups lived prior to the arrival of Europeans, followed by an emphasis on interaction through the period of exploration and the fur trade. In the later nineteenth century there are discussions of treaties and the 1869 and 1885 Métis (and Aboriginal in 1885) resistances. With the occasional reference to involvement of Aboriginal soldiers in World War One or Two, Aboriginal people do not appear again in textbooks for almost a century – from Métis leader Louis Riel's execution for treason in 1885, to the 1960s, when native singer Buffy Sainte-Marie began writing and singing protest songs. (Sainte-Marie is an obvious choice for inclusion because she fits both the categories of "exotic" and "protest.") Students must wonder what they are to make of this. Where were Aboriginal people and what were they doing the rest of the time?

The absence of Aboriginal people can be attributed to three causes. First, they did not figure prominently on the political scene until the late 1960s and Canadian history texts, in keeping with provincial curriculum requirements, have featured political and economic developments. They are outside the real action of the textbooks because they are seen as outside the narrative of progress that is Canadian history. Second, there is little academic research to support textbook authors. Ken Coates and Robin Fisher have pointed out that "despite the proliferation of fine writing in the field, enormous historiographical gaps remain. Academics have documented comparatively little about twentieth-century developments related to First Nations (particularly the post–Second World War period), despite the fact that there is no shortage of detailed government and other records relating to the era."[27] As more Aboriginal people become academics, and as interest in such research continues to increase in the broader research community, this void will be filled. Third, contemporary historians rarely write history textbooks for a pre-university audience, with the result that existing academic research does not necessarily find its way into textbooks.

*For thousands of years*
*I have spoken the language of the land*
*and listened to its many voices.*
*I took what I needed*
*and found there was plenty for everyone.*
*feeling the blessing of the Supreme Spirit.*
*I lived in the brotherhood of all beings.*[28]

This poem is representative of the image of unique spirituality coupled with environmental stewardship found in the texts. I note that this image is also evident in the Western Canadian Protocol (2000) documents, a regional curriculum initiative involving several western provinces and the three territories. According to the foundation

document: "Aboriginal people have a unique relationship with the land and their environment, and that relationship is strong and spiritual."[29] There is controversy among historians regarding the accuracy of this image of custodians of the earth. Some contend that Aboriginal people have had a special reverence for the earth and a unique wisdom about it, because of their closeness to it and dependence on it. Others argue that this is an excessively romantic view which has been promoted in self-serving fashion by the contemporary environmentalism movement.[30]

### Some Implications for Instruction

There is a story to be told in school history texts, and in telling that story, choices must be made as to what is to be included and what is to be excluded. The narrative is one of progress – progress in taming the wilderness and the people who lived in it at the time of European arrival; progress in establishing orderly (European) systems of law and government; progress in building efficient networks of transportation, communication, and trade.

Aboriginal peoples are "othered" in this narrative of progress. They are present in relation to the European settler story. Thus, textbooks typically include a section called something like "Native Peoples in North America Prior to Contact," as if Aboriginal lives were conducted in a sort of anteroom to the real business of the project of European colonization and settlement. There is a sense of timelessness in this representation, as if nothing changed until the arrival of Europeans. Next we see "Native Peoples and Their Role in the Fur Trade." They appear in their canoes at the fur forts. But there is no indication as to what they are doing the rest of the time.

There are pedagogical implications, of course. We need, as educator Ken Osborne once put it, to "demystify and dethrone"[31] the textbook; to topple it off its pedestal in the classroom and make room for other resources. We can use materials developed by Aboriginal people themselves. Aboriginal educator Susan Dion has called for this change: "Only when literature written by First Nations writers and art produced by First Nations artists become part of the curriculum... will students begin to recognize that there is far more to being First Nations than beads and feathers and that our identity is not something that can be pulled on and off like a pair of jeans."[32] She continues, "through the act of (re)telling, we are claiming a space within which Canadians are called upon to begin the work required to face a shared history that requires responsible attention."[33]

Walter Werner has suggested the metaphor of the "montage" as a way of combining diverse primary and secondary sources without the overlay of a unifying narrative. Students have to make sense of the array of accounts before them without input from the textbook author. (Of course, note must be taken that someone has selected these various accounts.) "Viewers are then forced to make sense of the event by correlating bits of evidence, weighing their relative importance, raising questions, and defending conclusions about what happened, who was involved, and with what consequences."[34]

Finally, teachers can help students disrupt the traditional curriculum narrative by asking such questions as: Where were Aboriginal people between 1886 and 1970? What were they doing? How have they been shut out of this account? As John Willinsky has written, "a critical space needs to be created in the classroom that allows students to stand apart from this representation of the world, to take issue with its inevitable and its readily available limitations in peering into and rendering sensible the lives of others."[35]

History educator, Linda Levstik has reminded us that, "It takes courage to challenge official stories, myths and assumptions, to ask sometimes uncomfortable questions, to demand support for assertions, and to develop supportable interpretations of the past... this is risky business."[36] This, along with listening to the stories of those who have been "othered," is a task for everyone involved in history teaching and textbook development, selection, and use: Department of Education bureaucrats, members of textbook selection committees, textbook authors and publishers, history teachers, and, finally, students.

* This article is a distillation of a chapter which will appear in *Teaching the Difficult Past: Violence, Reconciliation and History Education*, to be published by Rowman & Littlefield. The project, which was sponsored by the Carnegie Council on Ethics & International Affairs and the Spencer Foundation, includes case- studies of secondary school history teaching and textbooks, examining how they promote (or fail to promote) political and societal reconciliation in nations where atrocities have occurred. Case-studies include: Northern Ireland, Germany, Guatemala, Russia, Zimbabwe, and Japan.

## Endnotes

[1] Rita D. Bowyer [sic], "Indian Life," *British Columbia Schools* 1 (February 1946), p. 43.

[2] See Arlene B. Hirschfelder, "The Emergence of the Plains Indian as the Symbol of the North *American Indian*," *in American Indian Stereotypes in the World of Children: A Reader and Bibliography* (Metuchen, N.J.: London, 1982).

[3] A complete list of the textbooks examined is available from the author.

[4] George M. Wrong, Chester Martin, and Walter N. Sage, *Story of Canada* (1929), p. 14.

[5] A. L. Burt, *The Romance of the Prairie Provinces* (1931), p. 18.

[6] Ibid., p. 181.

[7] Arthur Anstey, *The Romance of British Columbia* (1924), p. 50.

[8] D. J. Dickie, *How Canada Was Found* (1925), p. 110.

[9] Burt, *Romance*, p. 169.

[10] I. Gammell, *History of Canada*, BC ed. (1921), pp. 223.

[11] D. J. Dickie, *In Pioneer Days* (1928), p. 36.

[12] Ibid., p. 122.

[13] D. J. Dickie and Helen Palk, *Pages from Canada's Story*, rev. ed. (1931), p. 77.

[14] Gammell, *History of Canada*, p. 37.

[15] Duncan McArthur, *History of Canada for High Schools* (1927), p. 66.

[16] Celesta Hamer-Jackson, *Discoverers and Explorers of North America* (1937), p. 149.

[17] George M. Wrong, *History of Canada* (1921), p. 13.

[18] A.L. Burt, *The Romance of Canada* (1937), p. 47.

[19] Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 119.

[20] "Slanted Textbooks," *Toronto Telegram*, January 18, 1967, p. 6.

[21] For a review of these studies, see Katie Cooke, "Images of Indians in School Textbooks," *in Images of Indians Held by Non-Indians: A Review of Current Canadian Research* (Ottawa, ON: Indian and Northern Affairs, Canada, 1984), pp. 43–50.

[22] Indian and Métis Conference, *Survey of Canadian History Textbooks* (Winnipeg, 1964), p. 18.

[23] Ibid., p. 2.

[24] Garnet McDiarmid and David Pratt, *Teaching Prejudice: A Content Analysis of Social Studies Textbooks Authorized for Use in Ontario* (Toronto: OISE, 1971), p. 51.

[25] Manitoba Indian Brotherhood, *The Shocking Truth about Indians in Textbooks* (Winnipeg: Textbook Evaluation and Revision Committee, 1974), p. iii.

[26] Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission, *Textbook Analysis – Nova Scotia* (Halifax: Queen's Printer, 1974).

[27] Ken Coates and Robin Fisher, eds., *Out of the Background: Readings on Canadian Native History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1996), p. 3.

[28] Angelo Bolotta, et al., *Canada: Face of a Nation* (2000), p. 292.

[29] Western Canadian Protocol, *Foundation Document for the Development of the Common Curriculum Framework for Social Studies Kindergarten to Grade 12* (February 15, 2000), p. 13.

[30] See Richard White, "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), pp. 171–85.

[31] Ken Osborne, "Teaching History Through Source Materials," in *In Defence of History: Teaching the Past and the Meaning of Democratic Citizenship* (Toronto: Our Schools/Our Selves Education Foundation, 1995), p. 155.

[32] Susan Dion Fletcher, "Molded Images: First Nations People, Representation and the Ontario School Curriculum," in Sel Coldstein et al., eds., *Weaving Connections* (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2000), p. 354.

[33] Susan D. Dion, "(Re)telling to Disrupt: Aboriginal People and Stories of Canadian History," *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 2 (Spring 2004), p. 74.

[34] Walt Werner, "How Do History Textbooks Facilitate Social Reconciliation? The Case of British Columbia." (Presentation made at "History Education and Political Reconciliation: A Symposium," UBC, November 8, 2003.)

[35] John Willinsky, *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 155.

[36] Linda Levstik, "Review, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 24, no. 4 (Fall 1996), p. 420.

