

Brian Titley
*The Indian Commissioners:
 Agents of the State and Indian Policy
 in Canada's Prairie West, 1873–1932*

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The Indian Commissioners: Agents of the State and Indian Policy in Canada's Prairie West, 1873–1932, is a beautifully-written, balanced portrayal of six government-appointed men who held the position of Indian commissioner in Canada's prairies. Reinterpreting and building on some of his earlier publications, Brian Titley weaves a multi-dimensional tapestry blending personalities with policy, political circumstance and Native resistance.

Titley begins by surveying key developments in Indian affairs from the fur trade to the years immediately following Confederation. Of particular importance are the Bagot Commission's 1844 recommendations to establish Indian reserves and promote Native self-sufficiency through agriculture. By the late 1800s, Canada's stated goal was to assimilate Indians into the emerging Canadian nation. But as Titley deftly illustrates over the remaining chapters, the mechanisms for arriving at this goal were "strictly segregationist in the worst back-of-the-bus sense of the word" (207).

The first "commissaire des Sauvages," was J.A.N. Provencher whose appointment set the pattern of patronage and corruption that would characterize the position until its demise in 1932. After a short time as a journalist and an unsuccessful attempt at politics, Provencher was led to the federal trough by his political allies. Titley portrays Provencher not only as administratively inept but only half-heartedly engaged with his role. Due to his "patrician" tastes, he favoured hunting and cafés over tending to the needs of the Natives. He was ousted in 1878 after an official inquiry found evidence of fraud, corruption, excessive expenditures, and overall neglect of duties.

Next is David Laird, who served as minister of the interior and superintendent

general of Indian Affairs prior to becoming commissioner. We learn that Laird's first term of employment (described in chapter three) was characterized by a chronic lack of equipment, supplies and personnel with which to address growing unrest among the Indians and Métis. Though hard-working and committed to negotiating treaties 4 through 7, Laird viewed Indians as "improvident complainers, limited in intelligence," and "troublesome to deal with" (61). When a change in government left him without a job, the issue of Metis land titles was left unsettled.

Laird's second term is discussed in chapter seven. Although almost twenty years had elapsed since his first appointment, Laird continued to view Aboriginal culture as "ludicrous and grotesque" (173). He presided over large-scale Native land surrenders while ensuring that political allies were well taken care of. He believed that industrial education was wasted on Native youngsters and advocated nothing more than "basic skills" instruction. Denying Indians both land and skills, policies under Laird left native youth with few resources from which to eke out a meager existence.

In 1878, Edgar Dewdney, was appointed Indian commissioner of the North-West Territories and ordered "to prevent starvation" among a native population faced with the loss of the buffalo. Like his predecessors, Dewdney was less than delighted but accepted the position largely for the \$3200 annual salary. Dewdney is remembered for recommending that officials fire incompetent farming program instructors appointed through patronage, developing an ill-conceived farm program, and introducing the "pass system" requiring Indians to seek permission to leave reserves. He was also key in managing settlers' anxieties and preventing the spread of dissent during the 1885 Rebellion.

Dewdney was succeeded in 1888 by his assistant Hayter Reed, known among the Natives as "Iron Heart." Having begun his career in the militia, Reed saw no need to consult with Indians. He simply gave orders and expected that they be obeyed. Under Reed's watch, some of the most discriminatory elements were added to Canada's Indian policy. The success of some native farmers had begun to irk non-Natives who considered the reserve system as a form of unfair subsidization. Reed responded by removing Indian agriculture from the competitive marketplace and permitting only subsistence operations. To curb production further, Indians were to make do with "hand tools" and were not provided with machinery. Referring to Natives as "the scum of the Plain," (96) Reed implemented the "outing system" whereby students were hired out to settlers as labourers. Not only were youngsters separated from family, language and culture, but they were vulnerable to abuse by employers.

When Reed's career ended over a scandal involving looted furs, he was replaced by Amédee Emmanuel Forget, a French Canadian sympathetic to Riel and the Métis. Sadly, his sympathies did not extend to school children. Forget turned a deaf ear to complaints of physical and sexual abuse in his region's schools due, in part, to his preoccupation with creating bureaucratic efficiencies. For this he was well rewarded with a twenty-five per cent salary increase.

Reed's replacement, William Morris Graham, best exemplifies the commissioners' arrogance and neglect. Among Graham's alleged "successes" was the model File Hills colony, established to segregate young Aboriginal farmers from their culture and

families. This venture prompted changes to the *Indian Act* enabling band funds to be allocated to public works on reserves without Indian consent. Graham's 1918 scheme to produce food for the war effort on allegedly "idle" Indian land ended up costing the department more than it yielded.

The *Indian Commissioners* is an excellent starting point for anyone new to the study of Aboriginal affairs. The book traces the Indian commissioners' vital roles in the expansion of British imperialism and the development of the Canadian nation.