THE WINDIGO, WEMSTIKOSHIW, AND WAR: THREE DAY ROAD AND THE INTERGENERATIONAL STORY OF INDIGENOUS CANADIANS

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The history of relations between the Indigenous populations of Canada and its colonial government is an inherently militaristic one. Charting an intergenerational story of this relationship from the early post-Confederation era, to the end of World War One, Joseph Boyden's historical fiction novel "Three Day Road" provides a historically accurate and poignant reading of the oft-unreflectively celebrated early years of Canada from a uniquely critical perspective. This paper further expands the fictional interactions of the novel's characters, and their historical inspirations, with analysis and comparison to other colonial examples from across the British Empire. In particular, it examines and compares the approaches of policing and education in the cultural unmaking of Indigenous peoples. Culminating in Canada's 'baptism in fire' of the Great War, the experiences of indigenous soldiers also find parallels with those of the other soldiers serving across the Western Front, further underscoring the issue's historical complexity.

Canada's founding is a story most often framed as one of relative peaceful development, bound by good governance, and punctuated by our exceptional rising to the task of supporting King and Country in the Great War. But the establishment of Canada and its national baptism in the fires of the First World War can easily be seen instead as the unmaking of its Indigenous population as a nation and culture. In this respect Joseph Boyden's historical fiction novel Three Day Road represents a poignant reading of Canadian history as a story of the destruction of Indigenous autonomy and identity through European nation building, and the war experiences of its characters as a glimpse at both the unique suffering and struggles of Indigenous soldiers, and the first winds of change that would soon rewrite the landscape of Europe and Canada.

Three Day Road is a story of Indigenous endurance, both literally and metaphorically, told by two major characters across a vast swathe of Canadian history. In late 1918, the elderly Oji-Cree medicine woman Niska travels home through northern Ontario by river, along with her veteran nephew Xavier Bird. Recently returned from the Great War, and addicted to morphine after loosing his leg, Xavier is haunted by the memories of his experiences overseas alongside his now-dead friend Elijah Whiskeyjack. Niska commits to saving Xavier during their voyage, sharing her story of life in the wilderness of Canada to remind him his roots, while Xavier opens up about his experiences during the war in France. The two narratives weave a cross-generational picture of Indigenous relations at home and beyond, illustrating the depths to which Indigenous people were transformed by Canada.

As Canada established itself, its approach towards Indigenous peoples was marked by a combination of legislated marginalization, and often harsh enforcement of this second-class status to ensure compliance. In contrast to other British colonies of the period, Canada's frontier was defined by established fur trading ties, as well as various treaties that nominally defined jurisdiction and ownership of the land.[1] As settlers began to move into frontier areas, the need to establish direct jurisdiction and effective enforcement of law became paramount to the Canadian government.[2] To that end, the Northwest Mounted Police was formed to spearhead Indigenous 'civilization' through magisterial authority to try and sentence suspected lawbreakers on the frontier, and to avoid repeating incidents like the Cypress Hills massacre that had originally prompted the force's creation.[3] To this end, the NWMP were a highly visible and empowered tool of the Canadian policy of frontier expansion and development, and one that the Indigenous communities there disproportionately felt the presence of.[4] This was further underlined by the 1876 Indian Act, which formalized the legal position of Indigenous people as second-class dependents whose status and rights were defined exclusively by the Canadian state.[5] Informed by the same colonial 'benevolence' as the NWMP, the Indian Act interfered directly in Indigenous self-governance by establishing band councils with no consideration for the actual composition of the populations they were meant

[1]Amanda Nettleback and Russel Smandych, "Policing Indigenous Peoples on Two ColonialFrontiers: Australia's Mounted Police and Canada's North-West Mounted Police," *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 43, no. 2 (2010): 359.
[2]Ibid. 357.
[3]Ibid. 358, 360-361
[4]Jeffery Monaghan, "Mounties in the Frontier: Circulations, Anxieties, and Myths of Settler Colonial Policing in Canada." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 47, no. 1 (2013): 123, 125-127.
[5]Sana Z. Shahram, "Indigenous Pregnancy, Birthing, and Mothering in Colonial Canada," in *Indigenous Experiences of Pregnancy and Birth*, ed. Hannah Tait Neufeld and Jaime Cidro (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2017), 17.

to represent.[6] When resistance arose, the NWMP would step in to enforce the Act through whatever tactics were necessary, combining their wide ranging powers with the dictatorial letter of the law to brutal efficiency.[7] Following the defeat of the1886 Northwest Rebellion, the overall stance of the Canadian government hardened further. While records support that the NWMP did minimize violence in prosecuting their duties, and maintained supportive relations with Metis and other Indigenous groups that mirrored earlier fur trading dynamics, this changed noticeably following the Rebellion and its hysterical aftermath.[8] Records of NWMP correspondence, as well as the general pressure of rumour and fear of Indigenous 'savagery' among settlers show the common conception of Indigenous people as a hostile 'other,' to be dealt with as an inherent antagonist, rather than an equal.[9] In Three Day Road, Niska's childhood is interrupted from its ordinary flow following her father's killing of a 'windigo' mother and baby. The following autumn the NWMP appear to arrest him to stand trial for murder according to Canadian law.[10] Illustrative of both the division between Indigenous and settler beliefs and practices, as well as the de facto preeminence of the Canadian government to unilaterally determine and enforce moral standards, this event is summed up best by Niska herself; "At the time of my birth, the wemistikoshiw were still dependent on us… until the day came when suddenly it was we who answered to them."[11] This shift in dynamics was most infamously embodied by the Residential School system. Included along with the establishment of reserves and promises of support in the Indian Act, the schools were an attempt to eliminate Indigenous culture at the proverbial roots.[12] In the novel, the reasons for each character's involvement vary dramatically, as do their outcomes. Niska is taken against her will, her sister Rabbit goes willingly, while Xavier and Elijah are directly raised in the school.[13] Each would face abuses either physically, mentally, and in Elijah's case sexually, that have come to typify the legacy of the system.[14] But beyond individual cases, it was cultural genocide combined with pathological abuses that elevates residential schools in the pantheon of colonial crimes.[15] Disillusioned and wounded, the constructed family Niska creates with Xavier and Elijah is an effective facsimile for the resilience of Indigenous Canadians as a whole, just as their experiences in the war would serve as a microcosm for both Indigenous, and broader effects of the Great War.

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[6]Timothy C. Winegard, *For King and Kanata: Canadian Indians and the First World War.* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012), 19.
[7]Ibid. 19-20.
[8]Nettleback and Smandych, 361, 363-364.
[9]Monaghan, 126-127, 129, 133
[10]Joseph Boyden, *Three Day Road.* (Toronto: Penguin Canada Books, 2005), 47.
[11]Boyden, 48.
[12]Winegard, 19.
[13]Boyden, 91-92, 214, 222-223
[14]Shahram 21-22.
[15]Ibid.

Where the imperial dimension of the creation and composition of Canada cast a long and noticeable shadow prior to 1914, Xavier and Elijah's service highlights both the unique context in which the 'alien' soldiers of the Empire existed, as well as highlighting some of the most tragic dimensions of the war suffered universally. At the outbreak of the War, Canadian recruitment policy followed closely on that of Britain; namely adopting a guarded pragmatism towards Indigenous inclusion balanced between fear of 'savage indians' disrupting order, and harnessing such presumed savagery for military and propaganda purposes.[16] This also served to perpetuate the marginalization of Indigenous soldiers along the lines of existing domestic and imperial policy.[17] In terms of service, Indigenous Canadians fought across every branch of the military, except the new Royal Tank Corps, including two predominantly Indigenous units: the 114th and 107th battalions.[18] In the case of the 107th, language was a noticeable issue as the majority did not speak English, resulting in the wise decision by Lt. Colonel Glen Campell to push for Indigenous language administration.[19] In the novel, the language barrier offers Elijah and Xavier a degree of individuality beyond their fellow soldiers, and particularly commanders, while highlighting their 'otherness' to these same people. Interestingly, a similar sentiment of isolation and unit camaraderie developed in Welsh speaking units, as testified by Captain L. Wyn Griffith, whose unit became "an enclave within a community", in which Welsh served as a barrier between the military world of English and became a retreat and private dimension to their shared experience that no English speaker could fully access.[20] In a similar respect the stereotyped specialization of Indigenous soldiers as scouts and snipers, and its recorded 'success' in the field, reinforced barriers as much as breaking them down. Both Corporal Francis Pegahmagabow and Lance Corporal Henry Norwest would reach record setting tallies over one hundred kills each, with the former reaching an unofficial 378. Pegahmagabow is referenced several times throughout the novel as a sort of supernatural legend, one that mirrors the racially located legends that followed Indigenous soldiers on both sides of the trenches[21]. Thus the war came to define Indigenous Canadians as preternatural killers, while serving to instill a sense of both mortality and humanity in others. While the novel's British commanders such as Lieutenant Breech are portrayed as either stereotypically combative or regimental in their own right, the experiences of Lieutenant Basil Wiley speak to a grand disillusionment of the principles and virtues of King and Empire instilled since childhood.[22] In particular, Wiley's experience of his men on the front quickly

[16]Winegard, 30-32.
[17]Winegard, 30-32.
[18]Ibid. 67-68, 117.
[19]Ibid. 71.
[20]L. Wyn Griffith, "The Pattern of One Man's Remembering," in *Promise of Greatness: The War of 1914-1918,* ed. George A. Panichas (New York: The John Day Company, 1968), 287-288.
[21]Winegard, 110-112, 117.
[22]Basil Willy, "A Schoolboy in the War," In *Promise of Greatness: The War of 1914-1918,* ed. George A. Panichas,(New York: The John Day Company, 1968), 323-324.

eroded his classist prejudices, while the brutality of the war did the same for much of his imperial fervour.[23] The reality of the war was harsh and uncompromising, and in his account of the opening days of 1915, French soldier Henri Massis noted that he and others would never see the countryside without "peopling it with these bloody realities."[24] While Indigenous Canadians would serve an integral role in the war, as well as suffer unique struggles thanks to the legacy of their historic marginalization, Xavier and Elijah also reflect the common humanity and tragedy that befell millions of young men in the trenches of Western Europe. As one of Massis' men would put it: "We are all here for misery."[25] Though few others could fully grasp the depths of that misery for the indigenous soldiers.

It is impossible to separate the creation of Canada from the unmaking of the First Nations of the Indigenous peoples of North America. Through a mixture of overt and cultural imperialism, the generations that Boyden's Niska represent were brought first into compliance, then subservience by the relentless march of Canadian and British Imperialism. Yet paradoxically, the experiences of the 'seminal tragedy' faced by Xavier and Elijah would mark both a recontextualization of Indigenous narratives, as well as a more profound shift in the mentalities of both soldiers and civilians the world over. While Xavier would return broken from the Great War physically, he would end the story a whole greater than the sum of his experiences and losses; and in this way, serve as a fitting representation of the weight of history on Indigenous Canadian's shoulders.

[23]Ibid. 325-327, 329-331.
[24]Henri Massis, "The War We Fought." In *Promise of Greatness: The War of 1914-1918,* ed. George A. Panichas, New York: The John Day Company, 1968), 278.
[25]Ibid. 283.

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