



In Hindsight: Half a Century of Research Discoveries in Canadian History

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Episode 18: Lester Pearson and Indigenous Canada

In early 2021, University of Toronto Press published my new book, *Seen but Not Seen. Influential Canadians and the First Nations from the 1840s to Today*. Within I explored through biographical studies the history of Indigenous marginalization and why non-Indigenous Canadians failed to recognize Indigenous societies and cultures as worthy of respect. Episode 18 extends the discussion to include Lester Pearson (1897-1972), one of our most successful prime ministers (1963-1968), as well as Canada's greatest diplomat, and the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 for his work in helping to resolve the Suez crisis the previous year. In honour of his international contributions, Ottawa's Pearson Building, home of the department of foreign affairs, Pearson International Airport in Toronto, and Pearson College of the Pacific on Vancouver Island all bear his name. John English, his leading biographer, aptly summarizes Pearson's domestic accomplishments in his short sketch in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*, ed. by Gerald Hallowell (Don Mills, Ontario, 2004) page 480: "Pearson created a considerable legacy: the Canada Student Loan plan, the Canada Pension Plan, a new

national flag, colour-blind immigration, medicare, bilingualism, and new regional development schemes.”

While his international and domestic achievements are now well known, Pearson’s record in Indigenous affairs awaits critical review. To emphasize the positive, three initiatives immediately come to mind. First, the prime minister on 23 April 1963 appointed Roger Teillet from Manitoba, the first self-identified Métis member of cabinet, as Minister of Veteran Affairs. Second, during the Pearson administration, the federally appointed Hawthorn Commission in 1966 produced the first of two volumes of *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada: Economic, Political, Educational Needs and Policies*. The commission took a very pro-Indigenous position, although it surprisingly made no reference to treaties. The Hawthorn Report demonstrated that the First Nations suffered from poverty and unemployment. After the publication of the report, the prime minister committed his government to revising the Indian Act, after consultation with the First Nations. Third, as discussed in Episode 2, Pearson supported the building of a pavilion for the First Nations at Montreal’s Expo 67, to present their own points of view to non-Indigenous Canadians.

Yet, overall, his administration’s relationship with the First Nations was uninspiring. During his boyhood in small southern Ontario towns where his father, a Methodist minister, served, the Indigenous population was tiny. From the late nineteenth century to the end of the mid-twentieth, their importance was minimal. Comprising under 2% of the total Canadian population, from the perspective of most non-Indigenous Canadians the Indigenous Peoples were invisible. They lived on reserves as wards of the Crown under Indian agents. Many believed into the twentieth century that they were dying out.

Their cultures and history in southern Ontario remained unknown. The north shore of Lake Ontario has a rich Indigenous past.

Human occupation began shortly after the retreat of the last ice sheets approximately 11,000 years ago. In the seventeenth century peoples of the Iroquoian and Algonquian First Nations inhabited southern Ontario. Toronto's location made it an important area of habitation. Portage routes ran northward toward Lake Simcoe and onto Lake Huron. Aboriginal artifacts such as spears and arrowheads, and pottery vessel fragments, establish the presence hundreds of years ago of large villages of the Iroquoian peoples. Around 1700 the migration southward of the Algonquian-speaking Ojibwe, or in their own language, Anishinaabeg, led to their occupancy of the north shore of Lake Ontario. In English, the non-Aboriginal newcomers termed these Ojibwe, "Mississauga." The British made treaties in the Toronto area with the Mississauga First Nations. The peoples and the treaties remain unknown to many living in the area a century later. In the words of Canadian historian Olive Dickason (see Episode 20), in the Americas themselves, and certainly in the land now known as southern Ontario, "The lands that appeared 'vacant' to the new arrivals were either hunting areas or else had been recently depopulated because of introduced epidemics" (Olive Dickason, *Canada's First Nations*, 1st ed. (1992), page 43).

Entering Victoria College, officially now known as Victoria University in the University of Toronto, Pearson specialized in history, but the onset of the First World War interrupted his studies. He enlisted in 1915, served in a hospital unit in Greece, and then trained as a pilot in Britain. Seriously injured in a London bus accident, he was sent back to Canada, finished his degree, then after the war worked in a Chicago abattoir for a year. Fortune intervened and he could escape the meat packing business. He won a scholarship to Oxford, where he excelled in sports if not academics. Back in Toronto in 1923 with a M.A. degree, Pearson gained a position in the History Department, and soon coached several university teams. In 1924, he married Maryon Moody of Winnipeg, one of his students.

Pearson's career plans shifted in the mid-1920s. In the long run he realized that he did not want to commit his life to scholarship. He did not publish. At one point he toyed with the idea of writing a history of the United Empire Loyalists. Pressure came from another quarter that he should write the biography of Egerton Ryerson. (The individual who eventually wrote a two-volume biography, C. B. Sissons, is the source of this information. See his 1952 *A History of Victoria University*, page 292.) Pearson resisted. His biographer, Andrew Cohen, has identified the problem: "He didn't have the solitary nature that scholarship demands" (*Lester B. Pearson* (Toronto, 2008), page 32).

In 1928 he left the academy and joined Canada's small Department of External Affairs. Here he truly found his life's work. By 1935 he had advanced to become the first secretary at the Canadian High Commission in London, a post he occupied until 1941.

Unfortunately, from the point of view of his Indigenous education, he was absent from Canada at the time of a most important First Nation conference. Toronto finally heard authentic Indigenous voices in September 1939. T.F. McIlwraith of the University of Toronto, holder of the first university appointment in anthropology in Canada, with the assistance of Charles Loram of Yale University, organized a highly ambitious two-week gathering: the University of Toronto–Yale University Seminar Conference on "The North American Indian Today." By invitation, over 70 U.S. and Canadian academics participated, as did 12 Indigenous delegates. For the first time in Canadian history, Indigenous people attended a Canadian scholarly meeting.

From 4 to 16 September 1939, conference delegates heard from various non-Indigenous speakers about the cultures, reserve economics, health, and education of the North American Indians in both Canada and the United States. At the meetings, Canadian officials explained their long-standing goal of eventual assimilation. Earlier that year Thomas Crerar, the federal minister

responsible for the Indian Affairs Branch of the Department of Mines and Forests, had summarized the policy dating back to the Gradual Civilization Act of 1857, saying, “It was thought their reserves would become training schools in which they could learn to adapt themselves to modern conditions, and from which they would graduate as full citizens as soon as they were qualified.”

In contrast, U.S. officials in the 1930s introduced a different approach. Instead of working to eradicate Indigenous cultures and identities, they sought to strengthen them. John Collier, commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, instituted an Indian “New Deal.” Although he could not attend the Toronto meetings, Collier’s speech was read to the delegates. Two key lines summarized the new American strategy: “Indian administration in the United States has during the past decade reversed almost completely the policies which had governed Indian Affairs for over a century. These policies were motivated by the desire of the dominant race to acquire lands and resources held by the Indians.” With the appointment of John Collier as U.S. commissioner of Indian affairs, the pendulum began to swing away from the unrelenting campaign to assimilate Native Americans. Collier made efforts to extend the Native Americans’ land base and worked to replace boarding schools with day schools. The Indian Reorganization Act gave Native American communities a measure of self-government. Indigenous cultures were to be encouraged, not suppressed.

Unfortunately, the press paid little attention to the conference. Four days before it opened, Hitler had invaded Poland. On 3 September 1939, the day before the conference opened, Great Britain declared war on Germany. Throughout the first two weeks of that September, the press focused on the rapid German advance deep into Poland. Halfway through the sessions, Canada declared war on Germany, on 10 September. On the last day of the conference, 16 September, delegates met to pass resolutions urging greater

attention to “the psychological, social, and economic maladjustments of the Indian populations of the United States and Canada.” The Toronto media paid little attention. On 17 September Soviet armies crossed into eastern Poland and divided Poland with the invading Germans, a division which held until the temporary German-Soviet collaboration broke asunder with the launch of Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, on Sunday, 22 June 1941.

Ignorance of Indigenous Canada remained endemic. In the early 1940s Kathleen Coburn, an English professor at Victoria College, soon to become renowned as one of the leading experts on the famous English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, became involved in contemporary Indigenous issues. She had a cottage in the Georgian Bay in Ontario adjacent to Wasauksing, the Ojibwe reserve on Parry Island. In her search for allies the university professor contacted Aileen Ross, a sociologist colleague recently arrived at the University of Toronto from McGill. Did she know other intellectuals possibly concerned about Indigenous issues? Ross responded to Coburn’s enquiry on 5 February 1943 stating that she had contacted John Humphrey, a young law professor at McGill. In retrospect Humphrey’s response was incredible, if understandable, considering the indifference and ignorance toward Indigenous issues in Canada at the time. Professor Ross reported, “John is very interested in the Indian problem, but says he knows nothing about it.” Only five years later Professor Humphrey would write the original draft of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an international document that identifies the basic rights and freedoms of all people throughout the world.

Widespread interest in Indigenous issues in both French and English Canada approached zero in the 1930s and 1940s. Canadians lacked any appreciation for and background knowledge of Indigenous history and cultures. In English Canada, for instance, as late as the mid-1940s, four major texts in Canadian political

science appeared between 1944 and 1947, each containing minuscule to non-existent commentary on Indigenous Canada.

In 1946 a federal government initiative emerged: the establishment of a Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on the Indian Act. The committee sat from 1946 to 1948 through three sessions of Parliament. Its major focus was the renovation of the Indian Act, which brought the Indian Affairs Branch (the new title of the Department of Indian Affairs) under public scrutiny – a rare development. After it had heard evidence on administrative matters from Indian Branch officials, the committee welcomed Indians to participate. This invitation marked the first time policy makers had sat down with Indigenous leadership on a formal basis and consulted with them about their views of existing policy. Representatives of First Nations and Indigenous rights associations testified in 1946 and 1947, with their contributions being recorded in the committee’s proceedings. In June 1948, after three years of public hearings, the Special Joint Committee produced its final report on revision of the Indian Act, with the goal of the First Nations’ full entry into mainstream society endorsed – but with the term “assimilation” now replaced by the more politically correct “integration,” which was seen as not only inevitable but also desirable.

A great opportunity for Lester Pearson to learn about Indigenous Canada came with his entry into the House of Commons in 1948. He ran in the riding of East Algoma. He now represented a district which extended roughly a few miles west from Sudbury to a few miles east of Sault Ste. Marie and northward from Manitoulin Island on the north shore of Lake Huron to the Canadian National Railway Line. The riding he held for two decades was about 20,000 square miles or so in extent (Lester Pearson, *Mike. The Memoirs of the Right Honourable Lester B. Pearson*, vol. 2: 1948-1957 (Toronto, 1973), page 6). At the time, it was known as one of the 15 ridings in Canada which contained a “substantial

concentration of Indians” (John Leslie, “The Development of Canadian Indian Policy, 1943-1963,” Ph.D. thesis (1999), footnote 62, page 206). After Status Indians gained the federal vote in 1960, they became a much more important factor in ridings like East Algoma. It was John Diefenbaker’s government that changed the section of the Indian Act that allowed Status Indians to vote without giving up their Indian status. As prime minister in 1958, John Diefenbaker appointed the first Status Indian, James Gladstone from the Kainai First Nation in Alberta, to the Senate. Diefenbaker wanted a First Nations voice in parliament.

Lester Pearson did not share John Diefenbaker’s decades-long association with Indigenous Peoples on the prairies; but, unlike the vast majority of non-Indigenous M.P.s of this era, in his riding he met Indigenous peoples. The newly minted politician was so natural with those he met, and in his own words (*Mike*, vol. 2, page 7), “I found it easy and pleasant (my background and training, as well as my nature, helped me)” A perfect anecdote confirms this. The Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre at Algoma University in Sault Ste. Marie contains copies of several photos of “Mike” visiting the Catholic Indian Residential School at Spanish on the north shore of Lake Huron. One photo shows him playing baseball with the students.

Several of Lester Pearson’s contacts with First Nations can be documented, through saved newspaper stories and other sources. For a decade, from mid-1960s to mid-1970s, Ed Rogers, chief ethnologist of the Royal Ontario Museum, paid for a regular search of a large number of Ontario newspapers for articles on the Indigenous Peoples (1964-1974). One very rich item is an article from the *Globe and Mail*, 4 August 1964, “Indians Salute PM with Feather, Flag,” datelined Manitoulin Island, “Special to the *Globe and Mail*.” The Pearsons, the *Globe* reported, met with Bill Wuttunee of the National Indian Council of Canada, also in attendance at the fourth annual Wikwemikong powwow. Lester

Pearson was given a white feather. Jean Cuthand, the daughter of the well-known First Nations political leader John Tootoosis, danced with “Mike” and Maryon Pearson with Bill Wuttunee.

The 1960s proved an important decade for Indigenous Prairie Canada. Roughly four decades earlier, the prolific journalist Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance wrote in an article “Where Are Western Canada’s Indians?” (*Vancouver Sun*, 7 June 1924), “One may live in any of the western cities for years without laying eyes on an original inhabitant of the country.” The Indian reserves and Métis settlements were most frequently found in Western Canada in more remote areas, away from the main centres of development. In the 1960s many Indigenous people had now begun to migrate to urban centres in search of jobs, housing, and schools for their children. They now constituted a large and visible part of the population in cities such as Winnipeg, Regina, and Edmonton. As Canadian society became more conscious of human rights, the limitations of federal Indian policy administered by an authoritarian, highly centralized and underfunded branch of government gained attention. Many non-Indigenous friends of the Indigenous peoples wanted to accelerate Indian integration and work to end Indian poverty and alienation. The emphasis of governments was placed on economic and social development.

An occasion arose near the end of 1965 for Prime Minister Pearson to catch up on contemporary Indigenous issues in an academic setting. On the University of Toronto campus, the Trinity College Encounter Club, established in 1962 and active until 1967, was a forum for discussion on national and international issues. In 1963, the club organized a Conference on African Affairs held over two days, bringing together ambassadors from several African states, academics, and a member of the U.S. State Department, speaking to 250 students and staff. In 1965, club members began planning the “Conference on the Canadian Indian,” to be held 22-24 January 1966. The primary purpose of the conference was to inform

students of the challenges being faced by Canada's Indigenous peoples. Members of the Encounter Club raised \$7,500 in donations to finance the conference. The main expenses were travel and accommodation, as the planning committee recognized that it was important to have strong participation by Indigenous people from across the country. Unlike today, when approximately 30,000 First Nations students are enrolled in post-secondary institutions, in 1965/66 there were only about 100 Status Indian students enrolled full time in Canadian universities. Expenses were paid from the donations and conference fees; government departments that sent speakers paid their own way.

Bizarrely registration took place in the Rhodes Room at the college. Nothing could have been farther removed from the spirit of the 1966 conference than the world outlook of the room's namesake. In addition to photos of the college's 20 or so past Rhodes Scholars, a portrait of Cecil Rhodes, the great British Imperialist who had founded and funded the prestigious Oxford scholarships, received prominent display. Once in a moment of ultra-enthusiasm for the British Empire Rhodes declared, "We happen to be the best people in the world, with the highest ideals of decency and justice and liberty and peace, and the more of the world we inhabit, the better it is for humanity," quoted in Richard Faber's *The Vision and the Need: Late Victorian Imperialist Aims* (London: Faber, 1966). (The Rhodes Room is now the Divinity Common Room. The portrait of Cecil Rhodes has been shipped to the Rhodes Trust at Oxford.)

Over two days, several hundred non-Indigenous and Indigenous participants met and exchanged views at Trinity. The conference received good coverage in the press, including all the major Toronto papers and *The Varsity*, the University of Toronto student newspaper. Arts events and films were a welcome addition to the talks, panel discussions, and seminars. The Indigenous participants included a "Who's Who" of the leadership of the day, namely

Senator James Gladstone and Gilbert Monture, the well-known Mohawk mining engineer and federal civil servant. The next generation to follow was well represented by writer and lecturer Basil Johnston, Stan McKay, a future Moderator of the United Church of Canada, and political leader Harold Cardinal, soon to become President of the Indian Association of Alberta and the author of *The Unjust Society* (1969), who played a major role in the fight for Indigenous rights. From Northwestern Ontario came Fred Kelly, who had been involved in the Indigenous protest that fall against racial injustice in Kenora. Walter Currie was Conference Chair. A non-status Indian, Currie was an elementary school principal at the time of the conference. He later became assistant superintendent with the Ontario Department of Education with responsibility for northern and native schools, president of the Indian-Eskimo Association, first chair of the Toronto Indian Friendship Centre, and chair of Trent University's Department of Native Studies.

The evening entertainment was provided by Chief Howard Sky, dancers from the Six Nations Territory, and actor/poet Duke Redbird. The Government of Canada was represented by R.F. Battle, Assistant Department Minister of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Affairs, and by Len Marchand, a Status Indian from British Columbia, Special Assistant to the Minister. Jean Lagasse, Director of the Citizenship Branch, Department of Citizenship, gave the opening address. Prime Minister Pearson was invited to address the closing banquet. But on 20 December 1965 he had to write Provost Owen, the head of Trinity College, to express his regret that he was unable to attend due to a scheduling conflict.

According to Father Ian Mackenzie, the conference's main organizer, the gatherings "began a process of supporting or making a base for native people to be put in a position where they were teaching rather than the recipient." The Trinity College Conference

on the Canadian Indian was one of the first student-organized conferences in Canada to deal with First Nations issues.

One of the last interventions by Lester Pearson on Indigenous issues came after the delivery of the second volume of the Hawthorn Report in October 1967. He committed his government to revising the Indian Act, after prior consultation with the First Nations people. Under his successor Pierre Trudeau, prior consultation was not forthcoming.

Background

The secondary literature on Lester Pearson is abundant. I found these studies the most useful for this episode: John English's two volume biography, *Shadow of Heaven, The Life of Lester Pearson, 1897-1948* (Toronto, 1989), and *The Worldly Years. The Life of Lester Pearson 1949-1972* (Toronto, 1992). Also, the essay on Pearson by John English, a former professor of history and a former Liberal Member of Parliament, in *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography on the Web* is recommended for a quick overview:

http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/pearson_lester_bowles_20E.html.

Andrew Cohen's lively account, *Lester B. Pearson* (Toronto, 2008), contains a very useful critical bibliography, pages 200-204. An older but still useful overview is Robert Bothwell's *Pearson. His Life and World* (Toronto, 1978). Renowned journalist Peter C. Newman's essential study of the Pearson years, *The Distemper of Our Times* (Toronto, 1978), remains required reading, but he surprisingly does not include any discussion of Indigenous issues. Two very useful overviews of the federal government's relationship with the First Nations include: John Franklin Leslie, "Assimilation, Integration or Termination? The Development of Canadian Indian Policy, 1943-1963," Ph.D. thesis, Carleton

University, 1999; and Sally M. Weaver, *Making Canadian Indian Policy. Hidden Agenda 1968-1970* (Toronto, 1981). Lester Pearson's memoirs, *Mike*, 3 volumes (Toronto, 1972-1975), are important.