



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

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## **Episode 9: Lord Bury, Superintendent General of Indian Affairs in the Canadas, 1855**

William Coutts Keppel, often styled Viscount or Lord Bury (pronounced “Berry”), the heir to the Earldom of Albemarle, arrived in Quebec in late spring 1854. Canada was then primarily rural, even the biggest cities being by our standards today quite small. Quebec, population approximately 50,000, was the second largest city in British North America, after Montreal with about 80,000 people. Toronto’s population was then about 35,000. Quebec City then served as the capital of the Province of Canada. It remained so until October 1855 when Toronto became the seat of government, part of the clumsy alteration that continued until finally Queen Victoria selected Ottawa as the permanent capital in 1857.

As a member of an aristocratic family that owned a vast estate in Norfolk, Bury belonged to the patrician power elite of England. A contemporary engraving of the viscount in his mid-20s shows a good-looking, self-assured young man. Thanks to his family connections and his own genuine ability, he enjoyed a multitude of career opportunities. Fortunately, a cornucopia of available source materials exists on his early life and on his year and a half in

Canada, which allows him to be described in welcome three-dimensional terms.

After Bury left Eton at the age of 17, he joined the Scots Fusilier Guards as a lieutenant. A year later he took a leave from the Guards to serve as a secretary to the British Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, a second cousin of his father. Shortly after his 20th birthday in April 1852, Bury accepted the invitation of Lord Frederick FitzClarence, Commander-in-Chief of Her Majesty's Forces in Bombay, to become his aide-de-camp. Lord FitzClarence was one of the ten illegitimate children of King William IV, Queen Victoria's uncle, which made Lord Frederick, a first cousin of Sir Augustus d'Este (fully introduced in Episode 7).

The adventuresome viscount selected a hazardous travel route to India. He chose to ride across Asia from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf, in preference to the much safer Red Sea route. While journeying through Kurdistan, he narrowly escaped being kidnapped, as he wore a fez and the Kurds mistook him for a Turk, their deadly enemies. In Baghdad, the young Englishman attended a grand hunting party on the plains where Babylon once stood. After sailing down the Tigris on a British gunboat, he embarked on a pilgrim ship across the Persian Gulf that took him to Muscat on the Gulf of Oman, then sailed to India. But shortly after his early 1853 arrival in Bombay, a serious illness led to his return to England and subsequent retirement from the regular army.

The next spring the young aristocrat departed for the Union of the Canadas. He had just turned 22. Upon arrival in Quebec, he apparently stayed at Governor General Lord Elgin's residence, Spencer Wood, in Sillery, three kilometres west of the city walls. On 24 June 1854 Elgin wrote his wife to say that he found Bury "a very nice & clever young man" (Lord Elgin to Lady Elgin, MIKAN no 4030109, Library and Archives Canada).

This was the English aristocrat's first visit to North America, yet incredible as it might seem today, within several months he was appointed to serve as the governor general's civil secretary, in charge of the 15,000 First Nations individuals living in the Union of the Canadas. Yet, within an Empire-wide perspective, this is perhaps not as extraordinary as it first seems. In India, district officers not much older than the viscount ran the lives of up to three million Indians spread over 17,000 square miles (Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London, 2004), page 184).

Three-quarters of a century later, under parsimonious Canadian control, accounting skills such as those commanded by Duncan Campbell Scott, who served in the Department of Indian Affairs for half a century, became the desired qualification.

In the fall of 1854 Elgin's seven-year term of office neared its end. The skilled diplomat had just successfully negotiated the Reciprocity Treaty of 1854. The sought-after agreement, now ratified by the provincial legislatures of British North America, allowed for free trade in natural products with the United States. Six years earlier, Elgin, on behalf of the British government, had given the colonists of the Province of Canada the responsibility to govern their own affairs. One of the few powers held back was Indian Affairs, until 1860. Elgin selected his brother, Robert Bruce, as his first appointee as his superintendent general of Indian Affairs. Laurence Oliphant replaced Bruce in early 1854, but later that same year Oliphant indicated he wanted to return to England upon Lord Elgin's departure.

Quebec's population was one-third English-speaking and two-thirds French-speaking. In the elite Upper Town, both language groups mixed socially. In the Lower Town lived the "little people," *les gagne-petits*, who worked on the wharfs and in the timber trade. They and their families suffered from poor housing, inadequate sanitation, and seasonal unemployment. What a

contrast, noted Isabella Bird, a young middle class English visitor, in late 1854. With all her class-bound prejudices she wrote: “The little world in the upper part of the city is probably the most brilliant to be found anywhere in so small a compass. But there is a world below, another nation, seldom mentioned in the aristocratic quarter of St. Louis, where vice, crime, poverty, and misery jostle each other, as pleasure and politics do in the upper town.”

In late October 1854, Miss Bird neared the end of her grand tour of North America. The agreeable young woman won invitations to the affable Lord Elgin’s dinners and parties at his Vice-regal residence. In her published memoir *The Englishwoman in America* (1856), Miss Bird recalled the splendour of parties at Spencer Wood: “glittering epaulettes, scarlet uniforms, and muslin dresses whirled before my dizzy eyes.” The dancing continued to two or three in the morning. Miss Bird met Lord Bury. In her unpublished journal on her Quebec visit, which I located several years ago through a digital search (it has since been donated to Library and Archives Canada), the Anglican clergyman’s daughter met the handsome well-spoken English aristocrat. At the ball Miss Bird attended on 25 October she reacted negatively. In contrast to her warm remarks in her published book, she wrote in her unpublished journal: “There was far too much riot and freedom at this party for my quiet taste and I greatly blame Lord Elgin for lowering the tone of Quebec manners.” Regarding the viscount, Bird noted his scandalous behaviour. “I saw Lord Bury sit for some time on the sofa with his arm round a young lady’s waist and this was by no means a solitary instance of impropriety.”

Lord Elgin was truly an Imperial Man. He left his Canadian post in late December 1854 for England, where he became a special envoy to China, and later served in Japan, ending his career as the viceroy and governor general of India. Before India, in 1860, Elgin achieved great infamy. In Canada he is best remembered for his granting of Responsible Government. In China he is reviled for

burning down the Emperor's Summer Palace in Beijing. (Tales of his action still elicit Chinese indignation, as my wife and I discovered on a visit to China in 2009.)

Upon the entry into office of the new governor general Sir Edmund Head, Bury replaced Laurence Oliphant. The fact that he knew French was a definite advantage. Few Anglophones in government had fluent French, Prime Minister Allan MacNab and Attorney General John A. Macdonald serving as two prominent examples. Bury's first half year or so in office passed relatively uneventfully. In Quebec City he worked in the Indian Department's office in the Union Hotel, Place d'Armes. The building is still standing, 12, rue Ste-Anne, now a multiservice tourist bureau. (It is located between the Musée du Fort, where I worked for week in June 1968 and the Musée de Cire—the Wax Museum, see Episode 2—where I lived for a week or so before leaving for Chicoutimi.)

Bury liked his job. By Canadian standards the pay was lucrative. He earned 675 pounds sterling a year. The five visiting Indian superintendents who travelled between First Nations communities throughout the Province of Canada only collected, all combined, 963 pounds, or roughly 200 pounds each. His position also carried prestige and importance. As the governor general's secretary, he associated "with public men of all parties" and was called upon to "maintain intimate relations with politicians of all shades of opinion." Disliking formality, the English aristocrat encouraged his friends and colleagues to drop "Lord Bury" and just call him "Bill."

Bad news struck in August when newspapers across the Province of Canada reprimanded him for allegedly taking a "loose" woman into his stateroom, on a steamer excursion down the St. Lawrence River. Worse still, it was said, he tried to bring his travel companion to dine at the captain's table. Bury fought back: "None of these statements are true." The lady, whom he did not know at all, had been refused a stateroom. To protect the "defenceless

woman,” he gave up his own to her and her female servant. They had not gone together to the “table of the steamer at all.” Some papers accepted his defence, for example Montreal’s *La Patrie*, which noted his politeness, his distinguished manners, and his conduct as a “vrai gentilhomme.” Others did not, such as the Toronto *Globe*, who referred to Bury as “one who has outraged all the laws of propriety.”

Premier MacNab’s attractive daughter Sophia stood by the charming viscount. She loved his stories and the humour of his telling them. In her opinion the ugly accusations against her new friend had absolutely no substance. Their relationship deepened emotionally in the months to follow. The lively intelligent Sophia was her father’s delight. A surviving diary written by her a decade earlier as a girl of 13 confirms how observant she was. Her entries show her discipline and attention to detail. As a young woman, she studied music and learned to dance and to write in an elegant hand. She learned the art of gracious entertaining. After her education in a good convent school in Montreal, Sophia also spoke conversational French. In Quebec City, the accomplished Sophia assisted her widowed father, Sir Allan, as his official hostess after he became prime minister in September 1854. Sir Allan supported their relationship.

On 15 November 1855 at Dundurn Castle, Sir Allan’s baronial mansion in Hamilton, Sophia MacNab married William Coutts Keppel, Lord Bury, heir to the earldom of Albemarle. The *New York Times* described the marriage as “the most prominent event of recent date in Canada.” The respectable Hamilton wedding silenced almost all the Canadian newspapers. John A. Macdonald later pronounced the Bury Affair “dead and gone” in a letter written to a Montreal journalist in January 1856.

In his Indian Affairs position Bury occasionally acted upon his sense of justice. Against the Governor General’s advice, for example, he had met in May with an angry First Nations delegation



from the Saugeen Peninsula (later named the Bruce Peninsula for James Bruce, Lord Elgin), and subsequently altered a reserve boundary. This immediately removed a major source of friction. Most important of all, in his final December 1855 report on Indian Affairs, shortly before his return to England, he noted the injustices the settler colonists were inflicting on the Indigenous Peoples. Without any hesitation Lord Bury called for the protection of the lands of the First Nations, because: “Left to their own resources the Indians would have no longer any defence against the whites, who forcibly squat upon their lands and plunder their timber.”

Yet Bury remained as culture-bound as anyone of his own time or ours. He neither understood nor valued the First Nations’ old way of life, terming it “primitive barbarism.” He had no understanding of Indigenous cultures and history. Several First Nations leaders in Canada West, as Ontario was then known, had endorsed the idea of boarding schools in the mid-1840s. But the Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples had different ideas of what this meant. Lord Bury visited the recently established Mount Elgin Industrial School and Model Farm at Muncey, Canada West, near London, in the summer of 1855, where he found his ideal. The discipline of the institution, regimented like an army barracks, no doubt attracted him. The superintendent of Indian Affairs had attended Eton, the most distinguished of the English public (i.e. private) schools, in which strict discipline was the unalterable rule. Bury had absolutely no idea whatsoever of how differently the First Nations raised their young. Great Lakes First Nations cultures neither understood nor valued regimentation. The corporal punishment of children appalled them.

Lord Elgin, the namesake of the residential school, had highly endorsed Indian boarding schools. In *Condition and Prospects of Canada in 1854* (Quebec: Printed by S. Derbishire & G. Desbarats, 1855) the former Governor General, just before his departure from Canada, had made his views known on “the difficult problem of

reconciling the interests of an inferior and native race with those of an intrusive and superior one” (page 32). In 1846 and 1847, he noted, the attempt was made in Canada “to establish among them Industrial Boarding Schools, in part supported by contributions from their own funds. If Schools of this description be properly conducted, it may, I think, be expected, that among the youth trained at them, a certain proportion at least will be so far civilized, as to be capable of making their way in life without exceptional privileges or restraints” (page 33).

Viscount Bury left Mount Elgin after his short 1855 visit most impressed, writing, “There is no want of mental capacity in an Indian. In one, at least, of the schools which I have visited, the scholars are fully equal, if not superior, to the average pupils of the common schools of the whites.” His brief stay at Mount Elgin only confirmed his mistaken opinion that full assimilation was indeed the road to follow. The former Etonian went on to add, “The pupils are generally intelligent, clean and orderly; some young men who have completed their course of education there, are now perfectly ready and able to take their places as members of the general population.” In hindsight, Bury’s and Elgin’s non-Indigenous contemporaries’ endorsement of assimilation, known to many today as “cultural genocide,” proved a catastrophic mistake. The results of the disastrous federal Indian Residential School system imposed in the late nineteenth century are clearly outlined in the 2015 *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Final Report, vol. 1, The History, Part 1. Origins to 1939*.

In the mid-1850s the Indigenous Peoples constituted less than 1 percent of the Province of Canada’s total population of roughly two million people of European background. The African Canadian population itself exceeded that of the First Nations. The accepted wisdom held that within two or three generations this “vanishing race” would assimilate or die off. This Bury himself believed. As he wrote in 1857, “notwithstanding all the care now



bestowed,” the end “is fast coming to pass—the extermination of the Red Man.” In view of their eventual extinction Bury argued that: “The only course which remains for the friend of the aborigines, is to watch jealously the conduct pursued towards them by the authorities, and to protest against unnecessary tyranny or injustice.”

In hindsight, Bury and his predecessor Laurence Oliphant missed an opportunity to contribute to fundamental change. Several months before his appointment a scandal had broken in the Indian Department. It was discovered that Joseph B. Clench, the Western Superintendent of Indian Affairs, had embezzled from the sale of Indian lands a sum later estimated at nine thousand pounds. Immediately he was dismissed. This left his former post as visiting superintendent to the First Nations west of London vacant. Egerton Ryerson, Chief Superintendent for Education for Canada West, the individual who is now regarded as the founder of the Ontario public school system, had served as the first Methodist minister to the Mississauga on the Credit River in the mid-1820s. He strongly recommended Peter Jones as Clench’s replacement. In a letter to Laurence Oliphant on 21 November 1854, Ryerson wrote; “I know of no man whom I think better qualified for the office lately vacated by the removal of Colonel Clench.” As Oliphant had before him, Bury did not choose the Mississauga leader to replace the disgraced Joseph Clench.

Back in England from 1855 onward, William Coutts Keppel did very well. He ran for and was elected to the House of Commons. In London commercial circles, he became a strong advocate of the practicability, and of the imperial importance, of a railway from the Province of Canada to the Pacific Coast. The Keppels had a family of ten children. One child died as an infant but the three boys and six girls, grew up to healthy adulthood.

Bury continued in politics, serving in the House of Commons for over a dozen years, then the House of Lords for nearly two

decades. His love of writing led to four articles on British North American affairs in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1857 and 1858. His big book on the British Empire, *The Exodus of the Western Nations*, his *magnus opus* at nearly 1,000 pages long, followed in 1865. *The Times* praised his examination of three centuries of settlement in the Americas as a work that “shows very great research with honourable industry.” Several articles on electricity and an essay on modern philosophy reveal his remarkably wide range of interests. His co-authored handbook on bicycling that came out in 1887 enjoyed great commercial success, running through five editions before his death in 1894.

A serious accident in 1867 handicapped Bury's political career. The explosion of a rifle while he was firing it caused a permanent disability when the breech bolt entered his forehead. His doctors prescribed “absolute surcease from any mental or political activity.” Nevertheless, he recovered well, even if he had to henceforth avoid strenuous political activity. He founded in 1868 the Colonial Society in London, which later evolved into the Royal Commonwealth Society. In 1876, during his father's lifetime, he was called up to the House of Lords as Baron Ashford, although customarily only one member of a family is a peer. On two occasions in the Lords, 1878-80 and 1885-86, he acted as the under-secretary for war. Sophia acted as his private secretary, writing letters in her large clear hand. On Easter Day 1879 he greatly pleased his devoted life partner by converting to her church and becoming a Roman Catholic.

Bury succeeded to the family earldom of Albemarle on his father's death in 1891, but he himself died three years later. Lord Bury, the 7th Earl of Albemarle, was buried at the family seat, Quidenham, Norfolk. Sophia survived her husband for nearly a quarter of a century. Several years after her husband's death, his convent-educated widow had the discomfort to see Alice, the beautiful, vivacious wife of her third son George, become the mistress of the

Prince of Wales. After the Prince acceded to the throne in 1901 as King Edward VII, Mrs. Keppel remained “la favorita,” to quote the widely used phrase of the day, throughout the ten years of his reign. The former Sophie MacNab, Dowager Countess of Albemarle, died in 1917. Today many descendants of the 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Albemarle and the Dowager Countess live in the United Kingdom, including their great-great-granddaughter Queen Camilla, wife of King Charles III.

The British government paid little attention to Bury’s report on Indian Affairs, submitted in early December 1855 and printed in June 1856. Within he had criticized the Imperial government’s intention to end its financing of the Indian department in the Province of Canada, arguing that this would amount to “a breach of faith” with the First Nations, who had, through the treaty process, given up their lands for British protection and support. But the Imperial parliament proceeded with its plan to turn over all financial and political responsibility for the First Nations to the Province of Canada.

Lord Bury had an extremely varied and interesting year and a half in the Canadas. A study of his Canadian sojourn provides both an entertaining snapshot of life in the higher echelons of Canadian life in the mid-1850s and a glimpse into the administration of Indian affairs in 1855, one of the last years of Imperial control. On occasion, he showed true humanity, such as his welcoming of the First Nation delegation in Quebec City after the Governor General refused to meet them, and his re-adjustment of a reserve boundary in the Saugeen Peninsula. The Viscount also raised the alarm in his 1855 report of the rapacity of land squatters and timber robbers on First Nations lands. Clearly there were also lost opportunities. On the negative side, most significantly, Bury passed over an opportunity to improve the status of the First Nations when he failed to appoint Peter Jones as Western Superintendent of Indian Affairs. For three decades, Kahkewaquonaby (Peter Jones) had

advocated a new approach to Indigenous affairs: secure titles to the First Nations reserves, a viable economic land base for each First Nation community, a first-class system of education, and self-government for the Indigenous population. The Mississauga leader wanted First Nations communities to become self-sufficient and stable, not to vanish. But the Indian Department wanted the Indigenous Peoples to leave their communities and fully join the dominant Canadian society. Through his Mississauga mother, Peter Jones was directly linked to at least 10,000 years of occupancy in North America. Viscount Bury could claim less than two years, and yet this newcomer to Canada became the senior administrator for all 15,000 Indians in the Canadas. Peter Jones could not obtain even the position of Western Superintendent.

### **Background Notes**

The text for Episode 9 on Lord Bury expands upon an after-dinner talk given at the Dundurn Castle Coach House Restaurant, 19 November 2008. The L.R. Wilson Centre for Canadian History, Department of History, McMaster University, hosted the evening. I also spoke on Lord Bury's year in Quebec City at the Quebec Literary and Historical Society, 28 October 2009. The assistance of Miranda Villiers, a direct descendant of Lord Bury, with my research was invaluable. My fully documented essay appeared in 2017, "Lord Bury and the First Nations: A Year in the Canadas," in Myra Rutherford, Kerry Abel and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, eds., *Roots of Entanglement: Essays in the History of Native-Newcomer Relations* (Toronto, 2017), pages 49-93. I am most grateful to Canadian historian Bob (R.D.) Gidney, with whom I am still in touch, about details of nineteenth-century Ontario educational history. As I write this episode I have before me a copy of his letter of 13 September 1974: "Enclosed is the Ryerson letter re. Peter Jones." A generous soul, Bob went on to add, "I'll have a look to see if I can find anything I might have that would be

useful.” And he ended, “Best wishes on the new job.” I had just begun teaching Canadian history at the University of Calgary.