

Boundaries of Person, Boundaries of Place: Wilderness, “Indians” and the Mapping of Canada’s Northwest Interior in 1857

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On July 31 1857, the British Parliament published the proceedings from a Select Committee on the Hudson’s Bay Company’s (HBC) monopoly over lands west of Lake Superior. With nineteen official representatives forming an “equal representation of friends and enemies of the Company,” the forty-day commission that had begun on February 5 collected as much testimony as possible on the nature of the lands and their inhabitants, and the HBC’s activities therein.¹ Of primary concern were the Red River settlement, Vancouver Island and other lands that might be considered “suitable” for cultivation and settlement. Ultimately, officials wished to determine what lands should be ceded to Canada for the purpose of settlement.

In 1838, the HBC had signed a twenty-one year agreement with British North America, securing a monopoly over Vancouver’s Island, Rupert’s Land, Indian Territory and Red River area. The agreement was initially seen as mutually beneficial for both Canada and the HBC. The Company exploited trade, creating temporary settlements and posts, while the government received royalties, and was mostly guaranteed security along the borders of the extant colony of Canada.² As the agreement came to its end and the value of the fur trade began to dwindle, however, “the definitions of the limits of Canada” were of increasing concern.³ With the disclaimer that “the best understanding should be cultivated between the Government of Canada and the Company,” the commission determined by July that Britain should legislate the annexation of “desirable” lands.⁴ The HBC should “terminate the connexion” with Vancouver’s Island as soon as convenient, some measures should be taken to shift the governance of the Red River settlement into the colonial government’s hands, and all spaces “found practicable to the west of the Rocky Mountains” should be handed over to Canada for the sake of settlement.⁵

This essay identifies the creative and often divergent constructions of place and race in one document that empowered officials three thousand miles across the Atlantic to make varying claims on a vast and diverse expanse of Aboriginal territories and peoples in Canada. I apply theory from existing scholarship about the “mutually imbricated” nature of space and race in the making settler-colonial worlds to find how six hundred pages of testimony from white men with only marginal experiences on the land itself legitimized the

¹ British House of Commons, *Report from the Select Committee on the Hudson’s Bay Company; together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index, [260-session 2]* (London, England: Ordered by the House of Commons, 31 July and 11 August, 1857) retrieved at *Internet Archive*, http://archive.org/details/cihm_48795; John Galbraith, *The HBC as an Imperial Factor, 1821-1869* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), 341.

² *Ibid.*

³ House of Commons, *Report*, xiii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁵ *Ibid.*

dispossession and marginalization the original inhabitants of those territories.⁶ I focus mostly on the lands between the Great Lakes and the Rocky Mountains, the bulk of which were fashioned in distant, imperial imaginations as "wilderness," unfit for or in need of settler "civilization." In conjunction with wilderness discourses, speakers defined the Indianness of the northwest interior. Mostly Plains peoples, the indigenous groups discussed in this document were universally painted as one with their environment: wild and uncivilized. They were, according to the commission, incapable of governing themselves responsibly, and were, worst of all, the sure victims of the "onslaught of colonization," should they not become in some way transformed.

The document provides some fascinating divergences in the mindsets of different colonial powers: the HBC, British settlers in Canada, and humanitarians. These divergences reflect how, as Bronwen Douglas suggests, "within colonial regimes and contexts [...] the efflorescence of racially charged utterances and practices betrays an astonishing variety, fluidity and internal contradiction."⁷ During the sessions of testimony and debate for this enquiry, constructions of land and Indianness in the northwest interior came together to justify variant and often contradictory solutions to the "problems" colonizers identified in the "unsettled" territory. All discourses that produced, and produced by, colonialism could be harnessed to dispossess Aboriginal peoples; the means and justifications for doing so in this document varied.⁸

The 1857 enquiry had "enormous implications" for the indigenous peoples of the geographies under discussion.⁹ Although much current scholarly work attends to the power of language and the need to decolonize historical narratives generally, Penelope Edmonds and Tracey Banivanua Mar point out that not much in the current historiography actually "attends to the local, particular and often violent historiographies in settler colonies themselves on the ground."¹⁰ In this essay, I attempt to step away from the tendency to "remain in the realm of theory" and instead apply existing theory to better contextualize and understand 19th-century thought about these lands, and the *physical* implications such thought could have.¹¹ As A.A. den Otter contends, the commission "offers a unique glimpse into the attitude of Europeans towards the aboriginal nations in the northwestern

⁶ Tracey Banivanua-Mar and Penelope Edmonds, eds., *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 3. For more excellent discussions of race, place-making and colonialism, see Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Bronwen Douglas and Chris Ballard, "Race, Place and Civilization," *The Journal of Pacific History* 47, no. 3 (2012): 245-262; Douglas and Ballard, *Foreign Bodies: Oceania and the Science of Race, 1750-1940* (Canberra: Australian National University E Press, 2008); Julie Evans, *Edward Eyre, Race and Colonial Governance* (Dunedin, N.Z.: University of Otago Press, 2005); Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Penelope Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).

⁷ Douglas, "Race," 245.

⁸ Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), 48.

⁹ A.A. den Otter, "The 1857 Parliamentary Inquiry, the Hudson's Bay Company, and Rupert's Land's Aboriginal People," *Prairie Forum* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 148.

¹⁰ Banivanua-Mar, *Making*, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

interior."¹² At the same time, however, Cole Harris argues, these attitudes resulted in "the forced displacement of people. One human geography was being superseded by another."¹³ Discussions of wilderness in this document provide striking examples of how colonizers perceived Indigenous lands to be "tabula rasa," on which decisions made across the Atlantic to map, bound and govern this region and its peoples, definitively "contradicted the human geography that had emerged on the ground."¹⁴

Whether friends or enemies of the Hudson Bay Company, most men agreed that the lands west of the Great Lakes and east of the Rocky Mountains were largely wastelands, unsuitable for colonization and requiring expensive and hard work to make them suitable. Before wilderness became embedded in Western imaginations as pristine spaces devoid of human activity and in need of preservation, these lands were seen as convenient corridors into more "desirable" areas such as Red River and Vancouver's Island.¹⁵ Edward Ellice's statement in the enquiry that "the land is of no value to anybody until it is cultivated" was reflective of general attitudes toward supposed wilderness spaces.¹⁶ Later, he emphasized the difficulty Canada would have enticing settlers to come to lands surrounding Red River; he could see absolutely no "inducement which would make settlers go there."¹⁷ "Those remote and little frequented wilds" remained mostly "native space," as Cole Harris points out.¹⁸ The northwest frontier was, to many witnesses, "a wilderness away from a neighbourhood [...] wholly unsettled except by Native Indian tribes."¹⁹ Importantly, the presence of Indigenous societies in this space did not render it any less wild. In time, colonizers felt, practical measures must be taken to engraft value onto the land.

The speakers also generally agreed that the Aboriginal peoples of the northwest interior were certain to be the victims of the impending westward rush of colonialism, and that some form of governance should be executed over them to determine how best to deal with this inevitability. Most speakers, except for those who had spent considerable time among inhabitants of the territories, made little distinction among diverse peoples, and these distinctions were usually geographically based, homogenizing all Aboriginal people residing within a seemingly homogenous geographical space. The "generality of them prefer the sort of wild life of hunting," one speaker claimed of the huge space between the Great Lakes and the Rocky Mountains.²⁰ Rare distinction was made among Plains peoples, and the distinction usually only emphasized the perceived increasingly uncivilized nature of "Indians" the further West of the Canadian territories one went. Governor George Simpson said that in spite of their best efforts to control the violence of people under their jurisdiction, and in spite of their successes elsewhere, "in the wars that take place in the

¹² Den Otter, "1857," 143.

¹³ Harris, *Making*, xvii.

¹⁴ Cole Harris, *The Reluctant Land: Society, Space and Environment in Canada before Confederation* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 409.

¹⁵ For changing colonial constructions of wilderness, see especially Julie Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters & Social Imagination* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005).

¹⁶ House of Commons, *Report*, 334.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 350

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 428; Harris, *Reluctant Land*, 389.

¹⁹ *Report*, 161.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

plains among the Blackfeet there are cases in which we cannot interfere."²¹ There were some striking differences among the HBC's, the colonial government's and humanitarians' attitudes about the "wildness" of these Indians, especially in their ideas about the future of that identity. Unsurprisingly, as the HBC tried to limit encroachments on their monopoly, they claimed that the "Indianness" of the northwest interior was basically incorrigible, and irreconcilable with settler culture. They emphasized that the wildness of these peoples could only be kept in check, but not removed. Because the "remaining portion of the country included between the limits of the Algonquins and the Rocky Mountains may be considered the occupancy of the Sioux, at the present day by far the most numerous and warlike native confederacy in North America," the peoples of those lands, as James Fitzwilliam claimed, must be kept under control.²² Fitzwilliam's racial views were particularly vehement: "I do not believe in the peaceableness of any Indian [...] I believe that any Indian will take any and every advantage he possibly can."²³ Even the HBC, with its policies of alliance, justice and peace-keeping, claimed that "among the prairie Indians we have no control," even if their governance had worked to keep "balance" elsewhere.²⁴

The Company's primary spokesmen were Edward (Bear) Ellice and Vancouver Island Governor George Simpson. Ultimately, though both foresaw the sure press of settler expansion, and were fully aware that British North America would annex some lands, they were intent on limiting change to the utmost.²⁵ To retain the *status quo* of monopoly, most friends of the HBC testified to an era when open competition made for violence with and among Aboriginal people. Alcohol abuse was, according to the HBC, another problem. Under the former system of fur trade competition, and in similar situations in the United States, "rum was given by the various parties acting in competition to the Indians and half breeds; the whole country was demoralized," Ellice claimed.²⁶ Simpson stated that without the monopoly, the peoples of the northwest interior would be "left to poverty and wretchedness."²⁷ Indeed, according to HBC speaker Richardson, if trade were opened up, "it would require a strong military force to keep the Indians in subjection."²⁸ Edward Ellice claimed in June that conditions before the merger were "very bad"; trade was conducted "with great extravagance," and there were "frequent collisions between the Indians and the whites."²⁹ However, since the monopoly agreement, they claimed, "quiet has been universally maintained throughout the country."³⁰ From these statements, the speakers' overwhelming assumptions were clear: Aboriginal peoples of these lands were incapable of partaking in European economies without the guidance and interference of Europeans: in particular, of guidance of the HBC.

In his forty-page testimony, the HBC governor of Vancouver Island claimed that the Company kept good control of Aboriginal peoples by applying the laws of justice from

²¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

²² *Ibid.*, 116.

²³ *Ibid.*, 117.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁵ Den Otter, "1857," 146.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ House of Commons, *Report*, 88.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 323.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 326.

England "as nearly as possible."³¹ The people of one area referred to as "Thickwood territory," were "under our own eye; we have a certain control over them."³² Through various measures of discipline and justice likely foreign to Indigenous peoples, the HBC claimed to have maintained peace among them and ensured "the country had been healthy, and the means of living, if not very abundant, have been sufficient."³³ Simpson recounted a story of some "Indian lads" at Norway House who had broken into a Company store. Their punishment, which, Simpson claimed, "was, in fact, no punishment," was to be transported from their district 300 miles away.³⁴ Under the auspices of the HBC, Aboriginal peoples were subjected to European standards of morality, behavioural protocol and measures of justice. The young men in this account exhibited behaviour deemed unfit for British society as the HBC understood it, and were sent away, thus likely dispossessed of their home lands and forced to resettle in unfamiliar territories. The narrative was intended to exhibit the Company's just and morally-upright treatment of the "Indians" in their territories.

The men who more urgently supported the spread of settler society tended to either completely ignore indigenous populations or to claim that these people must in time assimilate and succumb to this expansion. The Métis leader James Isbister, for example, compared missionary efforts to those of the HBC in "Christianizing and civilising the natives."³⁵ The HBC not only prevented settler civilization from saving the Aboriginal peoples of the interior, but also stood in the way of Christianity. He felt that the Company was in fact manipulating the lands and their peoples to get furs at the cheapest rate possible, and that the "Canadians would assist in the development of the resources."³⁶ Worse still, he stated, the Company generally "obstructed the settlement of Indians near the missionaries": one of the few forces in that territory that could maintain the progress of civilization among the "Indian tribes."³⁷ Christianity, he believed, "has made very rapid progress in the last few years, since the bishop went there."³⁸ On the whole, he said, the HBC monopoly was "unfavourable to the development of the resources of the country, and also to the enlightenment and progress in civilization of the inhabitants."³⁹

William Henry Draper, Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas of Upper Canada, had never visited the lands west of the Lake Superior, but strongly advocated the expansion of the colony into these lands. "That territory," he argued, "should be maintained as a British possession [...] because *the people of Canada* look to it as a country into which they ought to be permitted to extend their settlements."⁴⁰ Indeed, Draper's testimony mirrored the rhetoric of publications circulating at this time, which tended to claim that "the time has come when Canada must *assert her rights*[...] by opening her remote territories to

³¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

³² *Ibid.*, 58.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.

colonization."⁴¹ British "title" to land was founded on the principle of discovery; "it is in the virtue of *Canadian Discovery* and *Canadian Settlement*" that the British were able to assert their claim over the territory.⁴² Draper was explicit about where boundaries of civilization should be mapped onto the land. Though he would "never dream" of setting them beyond the Rocky Mountains, he felt that "Canada should be permitted to lay out townships, and that as fast as she did actually lay them out and settle them, those portions of the territory so settled should become incorporated with" the province.⁴³ Interestingly, he sided with the Hudson's Bay Company in his ideas about the "Indian" problem. In situations, he said, where trade competition existed, "it has two effects; first of all, the indiscriminate and unlimited use of spirituous liquors [...] which is of itself a most prejudicial thing to the Indians" and second, that quarrels among rivals often produced bloodshed.⁴⁴ While the colony of Canada must extend its boundaries beyond the Great Lakes, the change must be a slow enough transition from HBC control, he suggested. Some stations and trade alliances "which have kept the Indians at peace," Draper thought, "must be maintained."⁴⁵

James McLaughlin made reference to the measures the Hudson's Bay Company took to control trade alliances with and among Aboriginal peoples and determine their life-ways for them. As a result of the monopoly, McLaughlin stated, Aboriginal peoples were unable to define their own trading networks because the company strove to "prevent it in every possible way."⁴⁶ This often led, he said, to their starvation. He claimed that the HBC "persecuted" peoples who tried to trade outside of the monopoly, even amongst themselves; that these people "received immense annoyance" from Company officials if they were found to have broken the boundaries of monopoly.⁴⁷ Apparently, he said, the Company requested that missionaries exert their "certain power and influence over the Indians" to discourage them from breaking HBC rules. Here, the peoples of the northwest interior exerted their desires and abilities to determine for themselves their space within HBC colonialism, likely attempting to maintain some traditional trading networks, or seeking alliances where they were more lucrative than alliances with the HBC. In spite of claims that the "wild" peoples could be easily duped into bad trades, it is clear that Indigenous peoples knew where to go to best serve their needs and, whether individually or collectively, prosper themselves if possible.

Homogenizing brushstrokes of "Indianness" were the products of longstanding discourses in colonial literature circulating for decades prior to the select committee of 1857. Of particular import was Herman Merivale's discussion of the "Native question" in his lectures to Oxford almost twenty years before.⁴⁸ Merivale took for granted Aboriginal

⁴¹ Canada, *Return of the Honorable Legislative Assembly, dated 16th March, 1857, requiring copies of any charters, leases, or other documents, under which the Honorable Hudson's Bay company claim title to the Hudson's Bay territory, or any maps relating thereto in the possession of the government (1857)*, (London, England, 16 March 1857), retrieved at *Internet Archive*, <http://archive.org/details/returntoaddressof00cana>, 24.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴³ House of Commons, *Report*, 212.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Harris, *Making*, 8.

people's backwardness and the certainty of colonial expansion. "By placing the Indians under the direct protection of the law and its ministers," Merivale stated, "it perhaps removed them from the reach of oppression."⁴⁹ Merivale's statement reflects the idea that before the civilizing progress of colonialism, Indigenous peoples lived in a state of oppression, and that "every advance from that state towards freedom, every step by which the native was liberated from any of his ancient burdens" should be a top priority in colonial agendas.⁵⁰ If Indigenous peoples should be, for a time, subordinated to "whites," he claimed, it was only for the purpose of securing their future freedom. Subordination and geographical "isolation" would be necessary until they could be "integrated in the long run."⁵¹ In June of 1857, when the Enquiry was reaching its end, Canada's Gradual Civilization Act sought to enfranchise Aboriginal peoples for the "gradual removal" of their "Indian" identity. The Act assumed that, by gaining full participation in Canadian civil affairs, propertied, literate and "morally upright" Indians of the Canadas could shed their "backwardness" and become full members of Canadian society.⁵² This unsuccessful piece of legislation was, like the 1857 commission, part of an ongoing conversation that cast Indigenous peoples as a dying race in need of progress and salvation.⁵³

Humanitarian speakers including the Church of England's Reverend Corbett, the Aborigines' Protection Society representatives, and Bishop David Anderson, tended to agree with James Isbister that, even in the northwest interior, Aboriginal peoples could be saved from their "wildness" if they were "civilized." Bishop Anderson, who had resided in the area for nearly eight years, stated that the "mission to the territories of the Hudson's Bay Company" was highly successful because of its Aboriginal clergymen and teachers. He claimed, "the Indians brought under Christian instruction are estimated at 8,000 or 10,000."⁵⁴ Undoubtedly, an outpouring of missionary accounts from the interior at this time encouraged humanitarian ideas generally. These accounts tended to focus on the "wandering" lifestyles, barbaric (non-English) mentalities and supposed lack of organized religion of the Plains peoples. Methodist missionary John McDougall reflected on his father's efforts in prairies in the 1850s and 1860s to rescue "these peoples from the barbarism, and shiftlessness, and ignorance and superstitions of centuries."⁵⁵ Robert T. Rundle, who preceded the McDougalls in the 1840s, wrote that plains people were "ripe for civilization and evangelization."⁵⁶ The best solution to backwardness, according to missionaries, was a re-settlement of aboriginal people in bounded spaces that kept religion

⁴⁹ Herman Merivale, *Lectures on colonization and colonies, delivered before the University of Oxford in 1839, 1840 & 1841, new edition*, (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts: 1861), retrieved at *Internet Archive*, <http://archive.org/stream/cu31924030554889#page/n7/mode/2up>, 273-274.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁵¹ Harris, *Making*, 8.

⁵² Canada. *An Act to Encourage the Gradual Civilization of the Indian Tribes in this Province, and to Amend the Laws Respecting Indians*, assented to 10 June 1857. <http://caid.ca/GraCivAct1857.pdf>.

⁵³ Robin Jarvis Brownlie, "A Persistent Antagonism: First Nations and the Liberal Order," in *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Order*, Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 298.

⁵⁴ House of Commons *Report*, 231.

⁵⁵ John McDougall, *George Millward McDougall: The Pioneer, Patriot and Missionary* (Toronto: William Briggs), 1902.

⁵⁶ Robert T. Rundle, "Letter to Wesleyan Missionary Society, 1841," in *The Rundle Journals: 1840-1848*, Hugh A. Dempsey, ed. (Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta, 1977), 87.

and agrarianism central. The Aborigines' Protection Society was publishing since the 1830s what it saw as evidence for the need of humanitarian works like its own. Though intent on securing compensation for the lands of Indigenous peoples, and even accusing the HBC for impeding efforts to improve Aboriginal lives, the Society operated on the same discourses of Indianness and wilderness apparent throughout the enquiry. That "the entire territory west of the Great Lakes was unsettled" was a serious problem because, "driven from their hunting and fishing grounds, nothing remains to the remnant of the ancient lords of the soil but their necessarily-resulting immediate and continued suffering and ultimate extinction."⁵⁷ For this reason, according to these speakers, the HBC's monopoly must be dissolved. Settlement and regulated agrarianism only could impede this "ultimate extinction."

Missionary Reverend Corbett, one of the few speakers who had actually been in the territory within several years of the 1857 enquiry, agreed. When the Church of England stationed him in HBC lands, he was faced with considerable resistance from the Company. He said the HBC had justified their resistance by stating that "the difficulties would be too great in governing the people there," but he found that the "continued perseverance of the missionaries" ensured that the settlement was built.⁵⁸ To discourage further settlement, the HBC had increased the price of lands for new settlers and for the "indignant" Indigenous peoples who claimed in response to be the "original proprietors of the soil."⁵⁹ Corbett said that in the country around Red River and for "a very great distance from its banks," the land was "very good for agricultural operations."⁶⁰ The Aboriginal peoples and "half-breeds" of the area were, according to Corbett, "very anxious" for education and civilization, and were in danger of the impropriety of certain fur traders who had procured alcohol from a grogshop and given it to certain "Indians," thus feeding their supposed weakness for alcohol.⁶¹ For Corbett, the Company's control over lands was morally degrading, especially for Aboriginal peoples in the area who needed guidance in becoming civilized.

F.W. Chesson, secretary of the Aborigines' Protection Society, forwarded a letter to the committee from the Saulteaux chief, Peguis. The letter embodied missionary discourses and corroborated with the attitudes of the Society, but also was a definitive example of Indigenous responses to their experiences with Hudson's Bay Company and with settler encroachments. "We have many things to complain of against the Hudson's Bay Company," Peguis stated, especially because they stood in the way of missionizing influences.⁶² People were dying because they did not receive fair prices for their furs and did not have sufficient access to hunting or fishing. Peguis stated that everyone was "not only willing but very anxious" to have settlers live among them, "after being paid for our lands."⁶³ Thus, on behalf

⁵⁷ Aborigines Protection Society, *Canada West and the Hudson's-Bay Company: a political and humane question of vital importance to the honour of Great Britain, to the prosperity of Canada and to the existence of the native tribes : being an address to the Right Honourable Henry Labouchere, Her Majesty's principal secretary of state for the colonies*, (London: William Tweedle, 1856), retrieved at *Internet Archive*, http://archive.org/details/cihm_22598, 2.

⁵⁸ House of Commons, *Report*, 138.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 148, 147.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 445.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

of his people, Peguis declared his loyalty to the British, his desire to curtail the Company monopoly and his commitment to settle. At the same time, he expected to be treated according to the rights enjoyed by British subjects, that a "mutually advantageous treaty be entered into with my tribe for their lands."⁶⁴ Perhaps strategically, though certainly in response to the realities of severe post-contact change, Peguis entered into discourses that non-Aboriginal officials would understand. The "poor Indians" were constantly robbed and kept poor by the traders; they were "especially indebted" to the missionaries, who taught them to be "honest, industrious and truthful"; they were in need of some external force to protect them from "oppression and injustice;" and their loyalty to the British crown should grant them "all the privileges of the whites."⁶⁵ His statement was further filtered through the Society's input:

it must be obvious that their character and habits [...] are alike unfavourable to that progressive settlement and civilisation of the country [...] and the question really comes to be whether these territories are to remain a wilderness till the tide of population bursts in upon them [...] or be opened up under the auspices of the Canadian government, whose interest in the welfare and improvement of the native race living under its jurisdiction, the society is thankful to acknowledge.⁶⁶

The Aborigines' Protection Society's statements cohered with other discourses of Indianness and wilderness embodied in the enquiry.

The committee concluded that most of the lands not practicable for settlement between the Great Lakes and the Rockies should remain under the jurisdiction of the HBC. To open the fur trade, they thought, would "infallibly" have "fatal effects" on the Aboriginal populations of the northwest interior.⁶⁷ In these territories "it is desirable that they should continue to enjoy the privilege of exclusive trade."⁶⁸ However, discussions of a road or railway that could cross the territories to connect the few "civilized" spaces tended to cross-cut proposed geographical boundaries. A railway could, in a continuous and more manageable version of the random HBC outposts throughout the "barren" lands, maintain and encourage a British presence through the wild interior and encourage the expansion of civilization. Even the remotest lands that seemed least useful were still invested with value to expand the vision of colonial hegemony.⁶⁹

The boundaries of the northwest interior were embedded in colonial imaginations as distinctly tied to boundaries of Indianness. Among some excellent scholars, Cole Harris has written that "imperialism constructs particular kinds of knowledge and representations of land by means of which colonial dispossessions proceed." The replacement, reconfiguration and rearrangement Indigenous geographies in colonized places depended on this constructed knowledge.⁷⁰ It is not surprising, then, that discourses

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 446.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 445.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 444.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, iv.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 3 and 7.

⁷⁰ Harris, *Making*, 48.

of Indianness and wilderness could so closely coincide in the 1857 Select Committee to inform debates about the appropriation and use of Indigenous lands in the northwest interior. Rhetoric in this document foreshadowed physical rearrangements of space and people across British North America, starting with the devolution of the "Indian problem" to the provinces in 1860 and, quickly after, the Numbered Treaties in 1871. Through a number of telling testimonies, the committee clearly defined boundaries between "those portions of the country which are or are not adapted for settlement," a definitive precursor to determining how those territories and their peoples could be pragmatically governed.⁷¹ Unsurprisingly, these conclusions, approached "in a spirit of conciliation and justice" for both the HBC and Britain's interests, elided the voices of Aboriginal people themselves.⁷²

⁷¹ House of Commons, *Report*, xviii.

⁷² *Ibid.*, iv.

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