**Chapter Outline**

to accompany

*Indigenous Peoples within Canada: A Concise History*, Fifth Edition

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**Chapter 10: The “Indian Problem”: Isolation, Assimilation, and Experimentation**

This chapter demonstrates the change in philosophy that would develop after the conclusion of the War of 1812 and the fact that Indigenous Peoples ceased to be viewed as allies. Covering the time period from the establishment of the Selkirk Colony in 1812 until the 1850s, this chapter examines the piecemeal approach that the British took towards “Indian” policy and the role that assimilation played in this policy. Several themes dominated British views on Indigenous Peoples during this time frame, including the belief that Indigenous Peoples were vanishing. Further debate dealt with concerns on which strategies might best be instituted in dealing with those populations that would remain. Two competing solutions came to the forefront: assimilation and isolation.

One of the earliest attempts at policy implementation—and a method that continued to be used from time to time—was the creation of what were called model villages, typically controlled by missionaries. The idea behind these was to have Indigenous communities conform to a model European-village lifestyle, with the result being assimilation; the eventual disappearance of Indigenous cultures, languages, religions, knowledges, and customs. The villages would facilitate Indigenous Peoples “vanishing” into the British-Canadian society.

Others saw attempts at assimilation as futile. Sir Francis Bond Head, the lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada from 1834–1838, argued that isolation was the key and that by fortifying Indigenous Peoples from all contact with Whites, the Indigenous way of life would eventually disappear. As one can see, the logic in this approach is seriously flawed as it is unlikely that people who were isolated would actually disappear.

Indian administration did not take a uniform model but changed as warranted. For example, in the Arctic, since no one except the Inuit was interested in permanent residence in that region, the British more or less ignored that area, and non-Indigenous intrusions were few and scattered until the mid-1800s when an interest in whaling arose. On the east coast during the late 1700s and early 1800s, the Mi’kmaq lost lands to squatters, but by 1859, legislation was enacted that stipulated those profits from any lands purchased by squatters be paid to Indigenous Peoples. The problem was that few squatters ever paid for their lands or paid them in full. On the prairies, as the mid-1800s approached, the fur trade was beginning to show signs of decline, and it was becoming apparent that the buffalo herds were declining as well, setting the stage for a period of distress for Indigenous populations. Some groups like the Ojibwe began to take up agriculture on their own initiative. Also, similar to the rise of other prophets in the east, the response to outside pressures and the presence and teachings of Europeans in the West was the rise of a new prophet on the prairies. Abishabis was the leader of this religious movement, which blended Indigenous and Christian elements.

Lastly, on the West coast, the administration of James Douglas attempted to deal with the land question based on the idea of “unequivocal recognition of Aboriginal title.” He signed 14 treaties on Vancouver Island and undertook the survey of reserves at the approval of most First Nations. In spite of Douglas’s more favorable attempts at working with First Nations, they had already suffered from considerable loss and disruption. The effects of these nineteenth century disruptions resulted in several divisions among Indigenous groups. During Douglas’s tenure, there had also been tense relations with the eruption of violence, which initiated the practice of gunboat diplomacy. Finally, the retirement of Douglas would result in Joseph Trutch coming to administer Indian policy; Trutch did not believe in Indigenous rights to land and set out reducing reserve size for the benefit of settlers, actions which have left a continuing legacy of litigation.