Myth, Symbol, and Colonial Encounter

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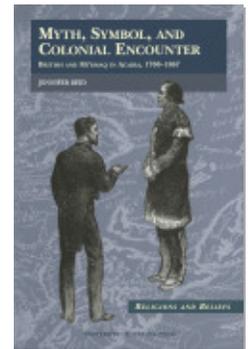Published by University of Ottawa Press

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CHAPTER FIVE

AT HOME IN COLONIAL ACADIA

WITHIN both British and Mi'kmaq communities, the need for a sense
of rootedness and continuity of place fuelled religious imaginations,
giving rise to religious symbols that confronted the necessities of place
while accounting for particular experiences. The lives that revolved
around these were encrusted with myths that articulated specific
instances of the unity provided by the symbols. In this sense, the reli-
gious imagination of all Acadia's people struggled with the problem of
identity and origins in a new world. Yet the problem was resolved in a
critically divergent manner by each community so that, overwhelm-
ingly, two distinct visions of human meaning emerged: one that sought
reconciliation with historical reality, and one that endeavoured to
reject it.

Those people whose vision rejected historical reality were, in the
first instance, confronted with a fundamental problem. The colonial
need to be rooted in Acadia was frustrated by the fact that a sense of
continuity of place was an impossibility—they were not at home. In
response to the problem, they recoiled from the place itself and
assumed the task of re-creating Acadia in the image of Britain, a place
with which they felt some sense of continuity. The land that they re-
created became meaningful space and a standard of measurement by
which all else was judged to be chaotic; and the humans they imagined
themselves to be were possessed of an identity carried over from
another place and time. Identity itself became self-generated as the
colonials affirmed their capacity to create themselves, uninfluenced by

historical experience. Civilization and human progress became the symbols that reconciled the reality of discontinuity with their sense of being British. The Acadia they had fixed upon was wild, and so, profane. The necessity that it become civilized—and sacred—space justified the retention of a sense of meaning founded in another space.

Yet the vision of a British Acadia and of colonial peoples who were purely British required that any experience of alterity be avoided, for such experience constituted the nucleus of a potentially transformative process into which they had little desire to enter. As Kenneth Burke once suggested, "it is in the areas of ambiguity that transformations take place; in fact, without such areas, transformation would be impossible."[1] Within the orb of this colonial vision, aboriginal peoples were situated in space that was profane. Like the uncultivated land that was without meaning, the Mi'kmaq were regarded as lacking human significance, and so were ignored altogether or imagined to be material for further acts of transformation. Even the desire to "civilize" the Mi'kmaq in order that they think and act like white colonials, no matter how much it was motivated by a recognition of their suffering, constituted a denial of their basic humanity. "In order to be determined . . . by an external factor," said Merleau-Ponty, "it is necessary that I should be a thing."[2]

Mutuality, and hence the experience of alterity that accompanies it, were incompatible with a British identity in Acadia. The myths that ran through this meaning of being in the New World gave a primordial structure to the reality of dispossession. At times, these demonstrated that the Mi'kmaq were fundamentally barbaric peoples who had been induced to less rude conduct through the progress of English culture. At other times, they attributed the near-annihilation of the Mi'kmaq to their own incompatibility with human progress. And at other times still, they sought to justify the appropriation of Mi'kmaq land and their modes of subsistence on the basis of their ultimate inclusion in the natural progression of human beings from primitive to European culture.

The Mi'kmaq were relegated to the peripheries of colonial society, tethered by the manipulation of incoherent messages from the white community. Just as Shakespeare's Prospero orchestrated the lives of other characters through the "artful manipulation of anxiety,"[3] British colonials curtailed Mi'kmaq access to arenas of British meaning through the use of contradiction. As a Mi'kmaq petition to the Nova Scotia government explained in 1840:

> Some people say we are lazy, still we work. If you say we must go and hunt, we tell you again that to hunt is one thing and to find meat is another. They say catch fish, and we try. They say make

baskets, we do but we cannot sell them. They say make farms, this is very good, but will you help us till we cut away the trees, and raise the crop? We cannot work without food. The potatoes and wheat we raised last year were killed by the poison wind. . . . All your people say they wish to do us good, and they sometimes give, but give a beggar a dinner and he is a beggar still. We do not like to beg. As our game and fish are nearly gone and we cannot sell our articles, we have resolved to make farms, yet we cannot make farms without help. We will get our people to make farms, build houses and barns, raise grain, feed cattle and get knowledge. . . . What more can we say?[4]

Of course, there was little to be said about any ambiguity in the Acadian experience that could have truly touched the colonial British. Their relationship with the native community was entangled in disparity, and it was virtually unassailable.

The most obvious form assumed by this ambivalence on the part of whites was the proliferation of discourse on allowing the Mi'kmaq access to the benefits of civilization and the virtual absence of tangible efforts in this respect. To make sense of such contradiction might require that we return to the issue of meaningful or civilized space in the colonial vision of Acadia. Both the British person and the re-created place constituted a pattern of significance surrounded by the chaos of wilderness (of which the Mi'kmaq were part). As noted previously, margins are perilous constructions and conceptions, since any alteration of their shape brings about a shift in the structure of the pattern they contain.[5] If, therefore, what is peripheral were to be permitted to enter into a pattern of meaning, the matrix itself would have to be redefined to account for the change. Turning to the British in Acadia, we must begin by noting that they were not British. Coming to Acadia, settling in Acadia, dispossessing Acadia's people, encountering quantities of land and resources previously unknown had all contributed to the formation of a colonial population that was peculiar to its time and place, and although on some level they were aware of this, on another more critical level they clung tenaciously to their purity of identity. It may well be, then, that aboriginal peoples remained suspended at the peripheries of colonial society in order to ensure that the society could stand fast as an identifiable pattern in which colonials might continue imagining their British identity. Perpetuating what they perceived to be a qualitative distinction between themselves and the aboriginal population constituted a means of re-enforcing and preserving their notion of purity.

The experience of Moses Perley would certainly support this suggestion. Regardless of his motives for advocating the amelioration of the socio-economic condition of the Mi'kmaq, by actively pursuing his

intention he clearly overstepped the limits of what the colonial govern-
ment of New Brunswick expected of him; his suggestions and propos-
als were rarely, if ever, considered in more than a cursory fashion before
being thrown aside. In addition to this, his recognition by the native
community situated him squarely on the margin dividing the two com-
munities, and that was a defiant and threatening position to occupy.
The administration he served had little alternative but to release him,
for as Mary Douglas noted, "any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its
margins."[6]

The strength of the British sense of purity of origins was so pro-
found that, when pressed to find some mode of portraying the distinc-
tiveness of the colonies to the European community, the colonials
looked to the Mi'kmaq community. At London's Great Exhibition of
1851, for instance, Nova Scotia represented itself with a display con-
structed overwhelmingly around items manufactured by the native
population: "a canoe, paddles, a dress, cradle, chairs, mats, cigar cases,
fans, purses, hoods, moccasins, [and] baskets." New Brunswick's
exhibit was similarly arranged around three men in state attire with a
canoe.[7]

The conception of Acadia as an extension of another place thus
abrogated the ability of colonials to acknowledge the distinct character
of themselves and of the world in which they dwelled. Yet their pro-
clivity for defining themselves in terms of the other place raises
another issue with somewhat stark implications. The colonial British
did not regard their identity as derivative of their historical experience
of crossing the Atlantic Ocean and settling in a different continent. Nor
did they consider it to be related to the palpable form of Acadia itself,
for that form was overwhelmingly subsumed by their imagination.
And they vehemently denied the impact on their meaning of the new
human relationships Acadia engendered. These colonials perceived
their identity to be internally generated. Yet, as Charles Taylor has
noted, a sense of identity that evolves in this manner is problematic:

> I can define my identity only against the background of things that
> matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of
> solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to elimi-
> nate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in
> which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow
> human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or
> something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an iden-
> tity for myself that is not trivial.[8]

Taylor's reflection is astute, but his notion of triviality may underesti-
mate the consequences of self-generated identity. The British creation
of themselves was inextricably entwined in their re-creation of the

world; Acadia as a British society was regarded as sacred space. As Joseph Howe (a man described by an early twentieth-century historian as "Nova Scotia Incarnate")[9] demonstrated in his description of a colonial farmer who had spent his day working the land, the British flag signified hallowed space:

> He lifts his eye and sees his flag unfurl'd,
> The hope—the guide—the glory of a world,
> Surveys the fabric, splendid and sublime,
> Whose arch, like Heaven's, extends from clime to clime.[10]

The colonials, whom Howe believed had been initially recognized as gods by the Mi'kmaq,[11] were burdened with a sense of guilt over the dispossession of aboriginal peoples.[12] Yet, they exonerated themselves by either affirming the intrinsic value of the processes of civilization and progress in which they were involved, or by seeking to re-create the Mi'kmaq. They claimed the capacity to absolve themselves of their own transgression.

The British could create themselves and other human beings; they could confer absolution upon themselves; and they could sacralize the world about them by creating it. But in striving to create a garden of Acadia they refused, it seems, to believe that there had been anything of meaning in that space before.[13] They were "the children of light"[14] of another time and place who had made sail across the Atlantic waters to plant for the first time in the "virgin soil"[15] that was the wilderness of Acadia. All this, one might consider, comes flagrantly close to resembling the story of the great planter of Genesis:

> And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light: that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.[16]

Were the colonial British "gods," as Howe intimated? God, as Northrop Frye has noted, is at root simply "a process fulfilling itself."[17] The British regarded themselves as the embodiment of the process of human progress in the New World—the mode by which "civilization" (the fulcrum of their own identity) "advanced."[18] Their identity was an *idea* that sought to realize itself in someone else's space. As the Mi'kmaq of the nineteenth century might well have affirmed, when one regards oneself as God, the rest of creation may find itself to be in a precarious position.

The human beings in Acadia who sought reconciliation with historical reality were, like their colonial contemporaries, confronted with a basic problem. The Mi'kmaq were rooted in Acadia, but their sense

of continuity of place was rendered tenuous by the ingress of Europeans who failed to recognize their presence as meaningful. In response to the problem, they strenuously asserted their established relationships with place and with each other, in the hope of surviving the onslaught of European advancement and of persuading the British to enter into relationships that would engender a new form of community appropriate to the human composition of Acadia. Meaningful space was consequently space in which various forms of interrelationships were acknowledged and nurtured, and the source of relationships themselves was the land and community. These assumed symbolic significance as they negotiated the chasm that lay between the conception of being meaningful and rooted people, and the experiences of both disregard and dispossession. Their vision of Acadia revolved around the imperative for mutuality, and their myths variously drew on the symbols of land and community to affirm Mi'kmaq significance and rootedness. Yet, unlike those of the British, Mi'kmaq myths did not assert a meaning of the human that rested on the non-meaning of others. Rather, they conferred a primordial structure upon the New World, and this structure contained sufficient space for all human beings—aboriginal or European—who acknowledged and respected their interrelationships with one another.

Human meaning, for the native community, emerged from a context of relationships. Identity originated in the experience of alterity rather than from an internal ordering of consciousness, so that ambiguity and diversity pervaded both the field in which human meaning was generated and identity itself. The Mi'kmaq regarded themselves as Mi'kmaq who were also New World peoples. Being New World peoples was a necessity for survival insofar as colonial oppression could not be avoided, and the threat of dispossession, illness, or starvation required that native peoples continually acknowledge and contend with the British presence in Acadia. Yet acknowledgment was made in Mi'kmaq terms. Being Mi'kmaq signified a fundamental valuation of the mutual and reciprocal nature of human existence. This valuation stood in marked contrast to the nature of European colonial existence, and so contained both a critique of contemporary society and a vision of more authentic community in a colonial world.[19]

Historians have generally regarded the nineteenth-century Mi'kmaq as a "powerless" people.[20] Upton, for instance, described Mi'kmaq strategy for dealing with the intrusion of Europeans in terms of "a determination to hold onto what shreds of the old life remained while steadfastly refusing to accept the new values. Only too frequently this response shaded off into a resignation so complete that white observers refer to it as a state of utter moral demoralization."[21]

"Power" in this context has focussed on the incapacity of the native community to resist the devastation caused by European incursion into Acadia. This definition disregards a different modality of power that emerged from a people who were able to acknowledge the diversity of meanings contained by the New World. The Mi'kmaq survived the oppression of the nineteenth century. And they carried with them a vision of Acadia that negated British notions of meaning, while remaining fully aware of the character of the society itself. A few years ago, Charles Long suggested that

> passive power is still power. It is the power to be, to understand, to know even in the worst historical circumstances, and it may often reveal a clearer insight into significant meaning of the human venture than the power possessed by the oppressors.[22]

The Mi'kmaq possessed this power.

British colonials in Acadia spoke of a purity of origins and a world of meaning devoid of human ambiguity. This discourse afforded them the power to claim Acadia as their home. The Mi'kmaq accepted Acadia's ambiguous human composition as unavoidable, but they knew that the colonials' sense of identity existed only in their language about themselves—that it had no more substance than the paper on which they wrote their treaties and legislative acts:

> [Christ] made a man then, took the earth and made a man. The earth was black, when he got the man to walk, he was dark. This man went hunting all the time. He gave him a bow and arrow, to shoot with. One time he saw this man was getting lonesome. He went and made another man. He got white clay, and this man was a white man. His hair was red. Man-made-first, God was speaking to him, saying, "That is your own, will be with you all the time." Second-man had a sack, with papers in it. He was named Hadam.[23]

The Mi'kmaq afforded the diversity of the New World a primordial structure that rendered it a reality. Within that diversity there existed two modes of being: one in terms of a relationship with place and one in terms of the printed word. In this sense, the Mi'kmaq may well have understood the British better than the British understood themselves. The colonials' sense of meaning did not derive of an authentic relationship with Acadia, but neither could it constitute the unity with Europe that they supposed. Their identity was consequently a product of language, not of place. In this sense, the myth of Hadam is curiously reminiscent of Caliban's injunction in the third act of *The Tempest*:

> remember
> First to possess his books; for without them
> He's but a sot [and] hath not

> One spirit to command: they all do hate him
> As Rootedly as I. Burn but his books.[24]

British and Mi'kmaq experiences and understandings of colonial Acadia were divergent, to say the least. With this in mind, we might return to one of the historical issues raised in chapter one—that of the relationship between history and multiple meanings. Colonial Acadia was a reservoir of such multiplicity. Its shores presented themselves to the European imagination as a "new creation"[25]— as far as aboriginal peoples were concerned, Europeans might well have landed on the Stygian Shore. For whites, Acadia was a place of hope where, with sufficient and appropriate effort, anyone could achieve what was desired. For the Mi'kmaq, it was a place of terror where, regardless of effort, survival itself became a tenuous undertaking. Creation and destruction were bedfellows in colonial Acadia, and it was from their coalescence that a new society emerged.[26]

Subsequent meanings of the human enterprise were as ambiguous as was the new society. The British confronted the world with an eye for its "improvement," regarding as significant those sectors of the wilderness that they had refashioned. Their notion of meaningful space pivoted on a compulsion to re-create the world they inhabited, and their sense of identity rested in a capacity to imagine the self apart from historical or geographical reality. For the British, the actual situation of the human being in history relinquished its constitutive significance to the interests of future possibilities.[27]

The Mi'kmaq encountered the world not as brute matter upon which to impose meaning, but as an arena of transactions that required human adjustment. Identity emerged as a consequence of one's ability to recognize the creative power of human, historical, geographical, or cosmic contexts in which the human being was situated. For the Mi'kmaq, the historical situation of the person constituted a matrix out of which notions of significance derived.[28]

Acadia was fundamentally a place of ambiguity. Within its sphere, those who sought to create also destroyed; those whose experience was one of profound hope were often oblivious to those who lived in terror. Notions of meaning were likewise ambivalent—in one instance, defying the reality of history; in another, conceding to it. Clearly the place was not possessed of the social or individual purity the British imagined. In.terms of both experience and identity, it was riddled with diversity. By insisting that they commanded a purity of identity, white colonials denied themselves the option of appreciating the true character of their world and of exploring the very new possibilities for human community it contained. Rather, in the interest of

sustaining their sense of purity, they sought to remove ambiguity from their field of vision—an exercise that had a horrific effect on the other humans in Acadia. To imagine their identity as unaltered, whites were compelled to adopt modes of existence founded in violence and self-deception. Their corner of the New World was a place of diversity but much of it was lost to them.

Although the diversity threatened the survival of the native community, the Mi'kmaq did not have the luxury of pretending it was not real. From the 1790s onward, day-to-day existence required constant vigilance; options for continued survival were assessed and reassessed, and then pursued in concrete terms. Of these, one option that found continual expression was the necessity to induce the British to not only acknowledge the human constitution of Acadia, but to allow their actions and notions of meaning to reflect the historical reality of their world.

The multiplicity of meanings tells us principally that Acadian history is about ambiguity and human destruction beneath a dominant veneer of purity and human progress. Perhaps the most striking ambiguity has to do with the fact that colonial Acadia itself was born of a particular European motion in time and space that forced upon non-Europeans the exigency of dealing with colonial peoples. In the wake of "discovery," these Europeans failed to come to terms with the human and historical dynamic of the world that they had inaugurated. Indeed, in Acadia, it was the Mi'kmaq who confronted this reality, variously calling their British contemporaries to do the same. In this case, Europeans discovered very little. It was the Mi'kmaq who discovered the New World.

Notes

1. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, xix.

2. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 434–435. This reference to Merleau-Ponty's work appears in Alverson, *Mind in the Heart of Darkness*, 6.

3. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 143.

4. Written February 8, 1840, reprinted in *The Acadian Recorder*, February 24, 1849, cited in Whitehead, *The Old Man Told Us*, 241.

5. Michael Taussig, in *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, writes: "Wildness also raises the spectre of the death of the symbolic function itself. It is the spirit of the unknown and the disorderly, loose in the forest and encircling the city and the sown land, disrupting the conventions upon which meaning and the shaping functions of images rest. Wildness challenges the unity of the symbol. . . . Wildness pries open this unity and in its place creates slippage and a grinding articulation between signifier and signified" (219).

6. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 121.

7. *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the* "Great Exhibition of the Work of Industry of all Nations, 1851," 969–970, cited in Upton, *Micmacs and Colonists*, 140. Upton reflected, "Faced with the need to represent themselves to the outside world, the colonists could find little that was original in their own society. . . . To display something distinctive, emblematic in its way, they had to turn to the crafts of the native people."

8. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 40–41.

9. Grant, *The Tribune of Nova Scotia*, 1.

10. From "Acadia," quoted in Kline, *Beyond the Land Itself*, 38–39.

11. Howe wrote, in "Acadia," "When first the Micmac's eye discerned the sail / Expanding to the gentle southern gale, / . . . As the bark drew nigh, / He thought some spirit of the deep blue sky / Had, for a time, forsook its peerless home / With the red Hunter o'er the wilds to roam; / Or that a God had left his coral cave, / To breathe the air and skim along the wave" (*Poems and Essays*, 15).

12. I would suggest that even the quantity of discourse that focusses on justifying this violence demonstrated a sense of transgression.

13. I first considered the whole complex of "planting for the first time" during a lecture given by Charles Long, in which he was discussing the *synchronic* language of origins in European America. The lecture was in the context of the course "World History of Religion," at Syracuse University, during the winter of 1991.

14. Burtis, *New Brunswick as A Home for Emigrants*, 37.

15. Gesner, *New Brunswick*, 4.

16. Genesis 1:1–4.

17. See Frye, "The Ideas of Northrop Frye," The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation transcript of "Ideas," February 19 and 26, and March 5, 1990, 21: "there is no such thing as 'God,' because God is not a thing. He's a process fulfilling itself. That's how he defines himself: I will be what I will be."

18. Gesner, *New Brunswick*, 4.

19. In considering this duality of meaning within colonized peoples, I am reminded of W. E. B. Du Bois's reflections on the nature of the self for African Americans: "One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. . . . The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his follows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 3).

20. Trigger, "The Historians' Indian," 37. This tendency to regard aboriginal peoples as powerless has been longstanding in Canadian historiography. Jacqueline Gresko has discussed this problem in "White 'Rites' and Indian 'Rites,'" 163. She points to such historians as J. M. S.Careless who have propagated the notion of native submissiveness. Cf. Careless, *Canada: A Story of Challenge*, esp. 22.

21. Upton, *Micmacs and Colonists*, xii.

22. Long, *Significations*, 195.

23. See Parsons, "Micmac Folklore," 88–89. Parsons has noted that the stories she collected for this article had been told by May Ducet Newell, who died in 1895 (55).

24. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 3. 2. 91–95, in *The Works of William Shakespeare.*

25. Gesner, *New Brunswick*, 1.

26. In respect to the experience of terror, Guy Carleton received a letter from a Loyalist officer at the close of the eighteenth century, in which the officer noted: "They [the Mi'kmaq] consider the English as having taken away from them their hunting and fishing grounds, which is their only means of support. They are not favourably disposed towards us, and have been only kept in order by terror." Extracts from "Remarks on the Province of New Brunswick" by Daniel Lyman (1792), PANB, PRO, CO. 188/4, vol 63, 39, cited in Hamilton and Spray, *Source Materials Relating to the New Brunswick Indian*, 61.

27. Barre Toelken explores this European American sense of future orientation in "Folklore, World View, and Communication," 269: "Anglo-American tradition deals with time and space in terms which insist that they can be, and ought to be, ordered, measured and planned . . . [there is a] belief that indeed time is a lineal reality the ends of which can be conceived of and discussed [and hence] our fascination with New Frontiers of any sort, new directions, future promises, and so on."

28. Toelken goes on from his discussion of "Anglo-Americans" to say, "the central interests of Indian life are largely served through mutual concerns, human interactions, and reciprocating responsibilities among men and between man and nature. The Indian sees himself as *in* nature, surrounded by it, not placed over it in position to impose a plan" ("Folklore, World View, and Communication," 273–274).

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