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Myth, Symbol, and Colonial Encounter

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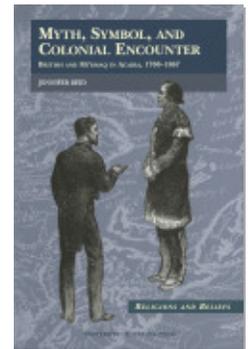
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CONCLUSION

Still Strangers

I BEGAN this inquiry by noting that one or another form of alienation appears to have been the experience of all Acadia's peoples. The bulk of this work has concerned itself with a search for the historical roots of alienation, but it may not have constituted a historical analysis in any familiar sense of the term, since it has consciously focussed upon human religiosity as that which gives meaning to history. History, like religion, is very much a product of the scholar's own historical context as well as of the scholar's purpose for writing. In that sense, this historical work is no different from those of George Heriot and John William Dawson. Heriot spoke of Indians in positive terms at a time when the loyalty of native peoples was desired as a bulwark against American aggression. Dawson regarded them as innately people of reason who were underdeveloped because of circumstance, at a time when assimilation of the aboriginal population appeared to support a general vision of a white Canada. I have likewise focussed upon native peoples as strong and independent agents at a time when aboriginal peoples across the nation have forced all but the most stubborn to recognize them as so.

This work is also similar to recent ethnohistorical research that intends to "free mainstream North American history from its legacy of a colonial ideology."¹ Yet where it differs from any of these also rests on the point of purpose. This analysis is the product of a self-conscious

desire to discover a mode by which our recently “freed” North American history can have a constructive impact on our lives as post-colonial peoples. I have attempted to demonstrate that a way to achieve this may be by recognizing, first, the mythic structures of our conceptions of ourselves in history and, subsequently, the religious power these maintain over us. The issue of native–white relations in the colonial period has thus been interpreted as a pervasively religious issue.

From this vantage point, white alienation has been interpreted as a matter of being estranged from the reality of the place in which they have found themselves, an inability to acknowledge the autonomous meaning of the land and its native population, apart from the creative designs of Europeans. As a consequence, whites have failed in some fundamental manner to come to terms with the impact of the place and its human composition upon their own identities, and so they have failed to recognize themselves as New World peoples. In the process of living out such a denial of reality, colonial and post-colonial Maritime whites have forced the alienation of aboriginal peoples variously from land and food, and from arenas of social valuation imposed upon the Acadian landscape. They have made “strangers” of human beings whose families have lived in the Maritimes for thousands of years, and who have sought throughout the post-Columbian period to live in community with all Acadia’s people.

In confronting the problem of alienation, this book began with the question of why it mattered to European colonials that they regard the Mi’kmaq in Acadia as strangers. I would now suggest that it mattered principally because the British sense of identity required a sharp distinction between itself and others in order to be sustained. In this respect, I believe this discussion could well be replicated in respect to many other dated and placed events in the colonial period, although that would clearly involve many other projects of this sort. If I might be permitted to bracket further research for the moment, I would like to conclude by taking up the challenge for transformation initially set out in chapter one, that is, in knowing why it was that colonials alienated themselves from particular aspects of Acadia, are we afforded the possibility of confronting our world in a more authentic manner? Can an understanding of our history free us from its constraint?

The necessity for this freedom is vital if we are to seriously confront the implications of alienation contained within Rita Joe’s description of her people as “still strangers.” In the final analysis, there is an aching sense of continuity in her words. In an 1865 biography of Peter Paul, a Mi’kmaq man from Nova Scotia, the author recorded a nineteenth-century plea that reverberates with the words of Rita Joe. Paul

said: "white man you got my country; keep 'em good, be kind to poor Indian—he have no country now—call'em stranger here."² In 1865, Peter Paul and his contemporaries had been drawn into a colonial recreation of Acadia that had resulted in their sense of having no place in which to meaningfully dwell. Whites had come to regard only those lives that were lived within this new creation as significant, and access to that arena was restricted to the descendants of Europeans. In 1991, Rita Joe pointed to the same social dissonance. In some critical respect, all Atlantic Canadians remain imprisoned by their history.

The alienation of all Acadia's people—of the Mi'kmaq from white structures of valuation and of whites from ourselves as New World peoples—emerged in the first instance from a European colonial need for a sense of continuity of place. Continuity, of course, was problematic for a group of people settling in a new place. Most had arrived in Acadia with a sense of identity that had been somehow disfigured, as well as a cultural inability to account for experiential ambiguity. Their problem was essentially one of reconstructing an identity that affirmed a sense of continuity—of truly being "at home"—within an environment that was brazenly unfamiliar. The solution to this problem lay in their imagining a British identity and re-creating Acadia in the image of English society. As a result of these creative acts, the land and people who could not be contained by the idea of English culture remained outside "civilization," at times invisible, at times emblems variously of the achievements of human "progress" or of its unfortunate but unavoidable ascendancy over other cultures. Always, however, colonials clung to the symbols of civilization and progress to justify their presence in Acadia and their British identity. Confronted with the actuality of both their historical situation and a collective identity that had been substantially recast by that situation, these colonials burrowed more deeply into their imaginations, and they constructed boundaries between themselves and non-Europeans in order to protect the purity of the cultural pattern on which their sense of meaning rested. The Mi'kmaq as "other" than civilized pointed to the distinctiveness of the white population. Colonials could consequently affirm their British identity by ensuring that the Mi'kmaq remain strangers.

As a mode of dealing with the world, alienation was a product of the human religious imagination as it was exercised in another time. Yet the problem of identity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial Acadia was a problem that we do not share with our progenitors. For better or for worse (depending upon one's cultural point of view), white Maritime Canadians now possess a measure of continuity in their place. Unquestionably, it is not a continuity with the depth of millenniums that first peoples command, but the fact remains that

whites are here and will not likely leave: on this planet, at least, there are no more worlds to be discovered.

The novelty of the New World lies foremost in its ambiguity and diversity. When Europe moved into the Atlantic, it initiated a shift in world culture in which all the world's peoples were to touch one another in a previously unknown fashion.³ Something very new did indeed emerge from the context of colonial contact, but it had little relationship with the languages of cultural purity that enveloped colonial Europeans such as the Acadian British. It had very much more to do with the presence of canoes and quill boxes at London's Great Exhibition, with the conferral of the title of honorary chief upon a white man who had earlier been fined ten pounds for killing a native American, with white soldiers claiming bounties on the scalps of aboriginal peoples, and with aboriginal peoples scaling the channels of colonial bureaucracies. The New World had also to do with farming and logging and unlimited possibilities for social mobility, and with hunger and disease and fifty people sharing ten blankets. From its inception, this world was simultaneously about hope and despair, life and death, creation and destruction. Those who lived in the sphere of hope and creation saw little more than these, yet those who were forced to withstand the aspirations of colonial Europeans recognized the fundamental ambiguity of the New World—that discovery was an act of creation that wrought overwhelming destruction.

In this sense our reputation, as the heirs of colonizers, is sealed, and we are consequently stuck where we are. As Lévi-Strauss reflected near the end of *Tristes Tropiques*,

our adventures into the heart of the New World have a lesson to teach us: that the New World was not ours to destroy, and yet we destroyed it; and that no other will be vouchsafed to us.⁴

Given the fact that we have nowhere else to go, it would appear that the time is upon us to seriously come to terms with the world in which we live. This investigation has constituted a possible point of departure for this task. We must understand that our modes of valuing the other people with whom we share our world are not related to the reality of the people themselves, but to a human need as it was experienced two hundred years ago. We must also realize that despite the fact that the "other" people had the same need, they emerged with very different valuations. In striving to remain "at home" in Acadia, for instance, the Mi'kmaq imagined a New World in which human diversity could constitute the foundation for new relationships and communities. Within such relationships, all human beings might be afforded significance and, consequently, the freedom to live, and to live as

autonomous agents. Christ and Gluskap were primordial colleagues who jostled with the Acadian landscape, and who gave an originary structure to the meeting of Europeans and native Americans that rendered the diversity of the New World a reality from which the aboriginal peoples could not turn away. The Mi'kmaq response to ambiguity was a profound effort to extend the boundaries of community and to call the British to do the same, so that Acadia might become a space in which all people could reside in mutuality.

The necessity for spatial continuity in their existence compelled the British to re-imagine and reconstruct the land and its human component in such a way that aboriginal peoples became alienated from even the most basic necessities of life. The Mi'kmaq, on the other hand, confronted the need for continuity by imagining a mode by which the same land might concede the presence and significance of all its people. This diversity of meanings points us to the primary ambiguity of creation and destruction that others like the Mi'kmaq have known and withstood for a long time, and knowing this affords us some option for transformation. Lévi-Strauss also suggested that, "In grasping these truths, we come face to face with ourselves."⁵ Yet what is it that really confronts us, except our own "otherness"?⁶ We can claim no identity founded in another place and time for we have become who we are because of our new location on the globe. We are other than we have too long imagined ourselves to be, for we are nothing other than New World peoples, with identities founded in the ambiguity that defines our world.

We are, then, faced with a choice: to continue to live within a mythology that reflects the instability of early colonial peoples, or to recognize another field of meaning that does justice to the tenor of our world. As the literary critic Gaile McGregor has warned, "to be oblivious to the duplicity of one's own myths is to be fooled by them, condemned, in a sense, to act them out over and over again."⁷ To turn away from our own otherness will condemn us to an alienated mode of being in which we will continue to shroud our identity from ourselves and continue to make strangers of the very people who can tell us most about the nature of our world and our significance. "The captor," wrote A. P. Thornton, "is held as firmly by the chain as the captive."⁸

Situating ourselves within another arena of meaning is not so herculean a transformation as it might appear. As humans, we have the capacity to live in many worlds of thought and action:

we live in several worlds, each more true than the one within it, and each false in relation to that within which it is itself enveloped. . . . Truth lies in the progressive expansion of meaning. . . . History, politics, the social and political universe, the physical world, even the

sky—all surround me in concentric circles, and I can only escape from those circles in thought if I concede to each of them some part of my being.⁹

We know that whites have situated all New World peoples in an essentially mythical world. If this world, this field of meaning, in which we now find ourselves to be is perceived as a vestige of some past reality that is not appropriate to our time and place, we have, on some level, already escaped from its constraint. It remains for us only to open our eyes and to truly discover a much more complex world that surrounds us—a world within which exist hitherto unimagined possibilities for human relationships. Many other peoples have been imagining these relationships for a very long time, for their experience of the New World has not afforded them the option of closing their eyes to diversity. They can tell us much about the larger “circle” of meaning in which we are situated, if we chose to enter it.

When Europe stumbled upon “that time so new and like to no other,”¹⁰ it inaugurated a situation in which human origins and identity were to become issues particular to its own space, and problems to be borne by all its peoples. In that sense, we are all Columbus’s descendants. We are now, as we have always been, confronted with a choice. We can live in a world of meaning that makes strangers of our partners in this enterprise we have called the New World (and strangers of ourselves, too), or we can situate that world within a larger one in which non-Europeans have been living all along. By moving into this larger context, we would chose to see and hear other meanings of ourselves that have never pierced the smaller circle—meanings that contain an authenticity of identity we have yet to experience. I hope that in this time we might make the choice for authenticity.

If the Indians today
Are not fictitious,
Then know them . . .¹¹

Notes

1. Trigger, “The Historians’ Indian,” 337.
2. Quoted in Whitehead, *The Old Man Told Us*, 267.
3. Long made this point in his introduction to Baudet’s *Paradise on Earth*, especially on page xi.
4. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 392.
5. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 392.

6. I have borrowed this term from a lecture given by Long for his course "World History of Religion" (Syracuse University, winter 1991). Long said that in order to formulate a discourse in opposition to that of "conquest," we "must first come to terms with our own otherness."

7. Gaile McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome*, 53–54.

8. Thornton, *For the File on Empire*, 341.

9. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 396.

10. The quote is attributed to Las Casas and is quoted in Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 5.

11. Joe, *Poems of Rita Joe*, 2.

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