

The Dawn of Canadian History: A Chronicle of Aboriginal Cana

Stephen Leacock

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Part I The First European Visitors

CHAPTER I. BEFORE THE DAWN

We always speak of Canada as a new country. In one sense, of course, this is true. The settlement of Europeans on Canadian soil dates back only three hundred years. Civilization in Canada is but a thing of yesterday, and its written history, when placed beside the long millenniums of the recorded annals of European and Eastern peoples, seems but a little span.

But there is another sense in which the Dominion of Canada, or at least part of it, is perhaps the oldest country in the world. According to the Nebular Theory the whole of our planet was once a fiery molten mass gradually cooling and hardening itself into the globe we know. On its surface moved and swayed a liquid sea glowing with such a terrific heat that we can form no real idea of its intensity. As the mass cooled, vast layers of vapour, great beds of cloud, miles and miles in thickness, were formed and hung over the face of the globe, obscuring from its darkened surface the piercing beams of the sun. Slowly the earth cooled, until great masses of solid matter, rock as we call it, still penetrated with intense heat, rose to the surface of the boiling sea. Forces of inconceivable magnitude moved through the mass. The outer surface of the globe as it cooled ripped and shrivelled like a withering orange. Great ridges, the mountain chains of to-day, were furrowed on its skin. Here in the darkness of the prehistoric night there arose as the oldest part of the surface of the earth the great rock bed that lies in a huge crescent round the shores of Hudson Bay, from Labrador to the unknown wilderness of the barren lands of the Coppermine basin touching the Arctic sea. The wanderer who stands to-day in the desolate country of James Bay or Ungava is among the oldest monuments of the world. The rugged rock which here and there breaks through the thin soil of the infertile north has lain on the spot from the very dawn of time. Millions of years have probably elapsed since the cooling of the outer crust of the globe produced the solid basis of our continents.

The ancient formation which thus marks the beginnings of the solid surface of the globe is commonly called by geologists the Archaean rock, and the myriads of uncounted years during which it slowly took shape are called the

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Archaean age. But the word 'Archaean' itself tells us nothing, being merely a Greek term meaning 'very old.' This Archaean or original rock must necessarily have extended all over the surface of our sphere as it cooled from its molten form and contracted into the earth on which we live. But in most places this rock lies deep under the waters of the oceans, or buried below the heaped up strata of the formations which the hand of time piled thickly upon it. Only here and there can it still be seen as surface rock or as rock that lies but a little distance below the soil. In Canada, more than anywhere else in the world, is this Archaean formation seen. On a geological map it is marked as extending all round the basin of Hudson Bay, from Labrador to the shores of the Arctic. It covers the whole of the country which we call New Ontario, and also the upper part of the province of Quebec. Outside of this territory there was at the dawn of time no other 'land' where North America now is, except a long island of rock that marks the backbone of what are now the Selkirk Mountains and a long ridge that is now the mountain chain of the Alleghanies beside the Atlantic slope.

Books on geology trace out for us the long successive periods during which the earth's surface was formed. Even in the Archaean age something in the form of life may have appeared. Perhaps vast masses of dank seaweed germinated as the earliest of plants in the steaming oceans. The water warred against the land, tearing and breaking at its rock formation and distributing it in new strata, each buried beneath the next and holding fast within it the fossilized remains that form the record of its history. Huge fern plants spread their giant fronds in the dank sunless atmospheres, to be buried later in vast beds of decaying vegetation that form the coal-fields of to-day.

Animal life began first, like the plants, in the bosom of the ocean. From the slimy depths of the water life crawled hideous to the land. Great reptiles dragged their sluggish length through the tangled vegetation of the jungle of giant ferns.

Through countless thousands of years, perhaps, this gradual process went on. Nature, shifting its huge scenery, depressed the ocean beds and piled up the dry land of the continents. In place of the vast 'Continental Sea,' which once filled the interior of North America, there arose the great plateau or elevated plain that now runs from the Mackenzie basin to the Gulf of Mexico. Instead of the rushing waters of the inland sea, these waters have narrowed into great rivers the Mackenzie, the Saskatchewan, the Mississippi that swept the face of the plateau and wore down the surface of the rock and mountain slopes to spread their powdered fragments on the broad level soil of the prairies of the west. With each stage in the evolution of the land the forms of life appear to have reached a higher development. In place of the seaweed and the giant ferns of the dawn of time there arose the maples, the beeches, and other waving trees that we now see in the Canadian woods. The huge reptiles in the jungle of the Carboniferous era passed out of existence. In place of them came the birds, the mammals, the varied types of animal life which we now know. Last in the scale of time and highest in point of evolution, there appeared man.

We must not speak of the continents as having been made once and for all in their present form. No doubt in the countless centuries of geological evolution various parts of the earth were alternately raised and depressed. Great forests grew, and by some convulsion were buried beneath the ocean, covered deep as they lay there with a sediment of earth and rock, and at length raised again as the waters retreated. The coal-beds of Cape Breton are the remains of a forest buried beneath the sea. Below the soil of Alberta is a vast jungle of vegetation, a dense mass of giant fern trees. The Great Lakes were once part of a much vaster body of water, far greater in extent than they now are. The ancient shore-line of Lake Superior may be traced five hundred feet above its present level.

In that early period the continents and islands which we now see wholly separated were joined together at various points. The British islands formed a connected part of Europe. The Thames and the Rhine were one and the same river, flowing towards the Arctic ocean over a plain that is now the shallow sunken bed of the North Sea. It is probable that during the last great age, the Quaternary, as geologists call it, the upheaval of what is now the region of Siberia and Alaska, made a continuous chain of land from Asia to America. As the land was depressed again it left behind it the islands in the Bering Sea, like stepping-stones from shore to shore. In the same way, there was

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perhaps a solid causeway of land from Canada to Europe reaching out across the Northern Atlantic. Baffin Island and other islands of the Canadian North Sea, the great sub-continent of Greenland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and the British Isles, all formed part of this continuous chain.

As the last of the great changes, there came the Ice Age, which profoundly affected the climate and soil of Canada, and, when the ice retreated, left its surface much as we see it now. During this period the whole of Canada from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains lay buried under a vast sheet of ice. Heaped up in immense masses over the frozen surface of the Hudson Bay country, the ice, from its own dead weight, slid sidewise to the south. As it went it ground down the surface of the land into deep furrows and channels; it cut into the solid rock like a moving plough, and carried with it enormous masses of loose stone and boulders which it threw broadcast over the face of the country. These stones and boulders were thus carried forty and fifty, and in some cases many hundred miles before they were finally loosed and dropped from the sheet of moving ice. In Ontario and Quebec and New England great stones of the glacial drift are found which weigh from one thousand to seven thousand tons. They are deposited in some cases on what is now the summit of hills and mountains, showing how deep the sheet of ice must have been that could thus cover the entire surface of the country, burying alike the valleys and the hills. The mass of ice that moved slowly, century by century, across the face of Southern Canada to New England is estimated to have been in places a mile thick. The limit to which it was carried went far south of the boundaries of Canada. The path of the glacial drift is traced by geologists as far down the Atlantic coast as the present site of New York, and in the central plain of the continent it extended to what is now the state of Missouri.

Facts seem to support the theory that before the Great Ice Age the climate of the northern part of Canada was very different from what it is now. It is very probable that a warm if not a torrid climate extended for hundreds of miles northward of the now habitable limits of the Dominion. The frozen islands of the Arctic seas were once the seat of luxurious vegetation and teemed with life. On Bathurst Island, which lies in the latitude of 76 degrees, and is thus six hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle, there have been found the bones of huge lizards that could only have lived in the jungles of an almost tropical climate.

We cannot tell with any certainty just how and why these great changes came about. But geologists have connected them with the alternating rise and fall of the surface of the northern continent and its altitude at various times above the level of the sea. Thus it seems probable that the glacial period with the ice sheet of which we have spoken was brought about by a great elevation of the land, accompanied by a change to intense cold. This led to the formation of enormous masses of ice heaped up so high that they presently collapsed and moved of their own weight from the elevated land of the north where they had been formed. Later on, the northern continent subsided again and the ice sheet disappeared, but left behind it an entirely different level and a different climate from those of the earlier ages. The evidence of the later movements of the land surface, and its rise and fall after the close of the glacial epoch, may still easily be traced. At a certain time after the Ice Age, the surface sank so low that land which has since been lifted up again to a considerable height was once the beach of the ancient ocean. These beaches are readily distinguished by the great quantities of sea shells that lie about, often far distant from the present sea. Thus at Nachvak in Labrador there is a beach fifteen hundred feet above the ocean. Probably in this period after the Ice Age the shores of Eastern Canada had sunk so low that the St Lawrence was not a river at all, but a great gulf or arm of the sea. The ancient shore can still be traced beside the mountain at Montreal and on the hillsides round Lake Ontario. Later on again the land rose, the ocean retreated, and the rushing waters from the shrunken lakes made their own path to the sea. In their foaming course to the lower level they tore out the great gorge of Niagara, and tossed and buffeted themselves over the unyielding ledges of Lachine.

Mighty forces such as these made and fashioned the continent on which we live.

CHAPTER II. MAN IN AMERICA

It was necessary to form some idea, if only in outline, of the magnitude and extent of the great geological changes

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of which we have just spoken, in order to judge properly the question of the antiquity and origin of man in America.

When the Europeans came to this continent at the end of the fifteenth century they found it already inhabited by races of men very different from themselves. These people, whom they took to calling 'Indians,' were spread out, though very thinly, from one end of the continent to the other. Who were these nations, and how was their presence to be accounted for?

To the first discoverers of America, or rather to the discoverers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Columbus and his successors), the origin of the Indians presented no difficulty. To them America was supposed to be simply an outlying part of Eastern Asia, which had been known by repute and by tradition for centuries past. Finding, therefore, the tropical islands of the Caribbean sea with a climate and plants and animals such as they imagined those of Asia and the Indian ocean to be, and inhabited by men of dusky colour and strange speech, they naturally thought the place to be part of Asia, or the Indies. The name 'Indians,' given to the aborigines of North America, records for us this historical misunderstanding.

But a new view became necessary after Balboa had crossed the isthmus of Panama and looked out upon the endless waters of the Pacific, and after Magellan and his Spanish comrades had sailed round the foot of the continent, and then pressed on across the Pacific to the real Indies. It was now clear that America was a different region from Asia. Even then the old error died hard. Long after the Europeans realized that, at the south, America and Asia were separated by a great sea, they imagined that these continents were joined together at the north. The European ideas of distance and of the form of the globe were still confused and inexact. A party of early explorers in Virginia carried a letter of introduction with them from the King of England to the Khan of Tartary: they expected to find him at the head waters of the Chickahominy. Jacques Cartier, nearly half a century after Columbus, was expecting that the Gulf of St Lawrence would open out into a passage leading to China. But after the discovery of the North Pacific ocean and Bering Strait the idea that America was part of Asia, that the natives were 'Indians' in the old sense, was seen to be absurd. It was clear that America was, in a large sense, an island, an island cut off from every other continent. It then became necessary to find some explanation for the seemingly isolated position of a portion of mankind separated from their fellows by boundless oceans.

The earlier theories were certainly naive enough. Since no known human agency could have transported the Indians across the Atlantic or the Pacific, their presence in America was accounted for by certain of the old writers as a particular work of the devil. Thus Cotton Mather, the famous Puritan clergyman of early New England, maintained in all seriousness that the devil had inveigled the Indians to America to get them 'beyond the tinkle of the gospel bells.' Others thought that they were a washed-up remnant of the great flood. Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, wrote: 'From Adam and Noah that they spring, it is granted on all hands.' Even more fantastic views were advanced. As late as in 1828 a London clergyman wrote a book which he called 'A View of the American Indians,' which was intended to 'show them to be the descendants of the ten tribes of Israel.'

Even when such ideas as these were set aside, historians endeavoured to find evidence, or at least probability, of a migration of the Indians from the known continents across one or the other of the oceans. It must be admitted that, even if we supposed the form and extent of the continents to have been always the same as they are now, such a migration would have been entirely possible. It is quite likely that under the influence of exceptional weather winds blowing week after week from the same point of the compass even a primitive craft of prehistoric times might have been driven across the Atlantic or the Pacific, and might have landed its occupants still alive and well on the shores of America. To prove this we need only remember that history records many such voyages. It has often happened that Japanese junks have been blown clear across the Pacific. In 1833 a ship of this sort was driven in a great storm from Japan to the shores of the Queen Charlotte Islands off the coast of British Columbia. In the same way a fishing smack from Formosa, which lies off the east coast of China, was once carried in safety across the ocean to the Sandwich Islands. Similar long voyages have been made by the natives of the South Seas against their will, under the influence of strong and continuous winds, and in craft no better than their open

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canoes. Captain Beechey of the Royal Navy relates that in one of his voyages in the Pacific he picked up a canoe filled with natives from Tahiti who had been driven by a gale of westerly wind six hundred miles from their own island. It has happened, too, from time to time, since the discovery of America, that ships have been forcibly carried all the way across the Atlantic. A glance at the map of the world shows us that the eastern coast of Brazil juts out into the South Atlantic so far that it is only fifteen hundred miles distant from the similar projection of Africa towards the west. The direction of the trade winds in the South Atlantic is such that it has often been the practice of sailing vessels bound from England to South Africa to run clear across the ocean on a long stretch till within sight of the coast of Brazil before turning towards the Cape of Good Hope. All, however, that we can deduce from accidental voyages, like that of the Spaniard, Alvarez de Cabral, across the ocean is that even if there had been no other way for mankind to reach America they could have landed there by ship from the Old World. In such a case, of course, the coming of man to the American continent would have been an extremely recent event in the long history of the world. It could not have occurred until mankind had progressed far enough to make vessels, or at least boats of a simple kind.

But there is evidence that man had appeared on the earth long before the shaping of the continents had taken place. Both in Europe and America the buried traces of primitive man are vast in antiquity, and carry us much further back in time than the final changes of earth and ocean which made the continents as they are; and, when we remember this, it is easy to see how mankind could have passed from Asia or Europe to America. The connection of the land surface of the globe was different in early times from what it is to-day. Even still, Siberia and Alaska are separated only by the narrow Bering Strait. From the shore of Asia the continent of North America is plainly visible; the islands which lie in and below the strait still look like stepping-stones from continent to continent. And, apart from this, it may well have been that farther south, where now is the Pacific ocean, there was formerly direct land connection between Southern Asia and South America. The continuous chain of islands that runs from the New Hebrides across the South Pacific to within two thousand four hundred miles of the coast of Chile is perhaps the remains of a sunken continent. In the most easterly of these, Easter Island, have been found ruined temples and remains of great earthworks on a scale so vast that to believe them the work of a small community of islanders is difficult. The fact that they bear some resemblance to the buildings and works of the ancient inhabitants of Chile and Peru has suggested that perhaps South America was once merely a part of a great Pacific continent. Or again, turning to the other side of the continent, it may be argued with some show of evidence that America and Africa were once connected by land, and that a sunken continent is to be traced between Brazil and the Guinea coast.

Nevertheless, it appears to be impossible to say whether or not an early branch of the human race ever 'migrated' to America. Conceivably the race may have originated there. Some authorities suppose that the evolution of mankind occurred at the same time and in the same fashion in two or more distinct quarters of the globe. Others again think that mankind evolved and spread over the surface of the world just as did the various kinds of plants and animals. Of course, the higher endowment of men enabled them to move with greater ease from place to place than could beings of lesser faculties. Most writers of to-day, however, consider this unlikely, and think it more probable that man originated first in some one region, and spread from it throughout the earth. But where this region was, they cannot tell. We always think of the races of Europe as having come westward from some original home in Asia. This is, of course, perfectly true, since nearly all the peoples of Europe can be traced by descent from the original stock of the Aryan family, which certainly made such a migration. But we know also that races of men were dwelling in Europe ages before the Aryan migration. What particular part of the globe was the first home of mankind is a question on which we can only speculate.

Of one thing we may be certain. If there was a migration, there must have been long ages of separation between mankind in America and mankind in the Old World; otherwise we should still find some trace of kinship in language which would join the natives of America to the great racial families of Europe, Asia, and Africa. But not the slightest vestige of such kinship has yet been found. Everybody knows in a general way how the prehistoric relationships among the peoples of Europe and Asia are still to be seen in the languages of to-day. The French and Italian languages are so alike that, if we did not know it already, we could easily guess for them a common

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origin. We speak of these languages, along with others, as Romance languages, to show that they are derived from Latin, in contrast with the closely related tongues of the English, Dutch, and German peoples, which came from another common stock, the Teutonic. But even the Teutonic and the Romance languages are not entirely different. The similarity in both groups of old root words, like the numbers from one to ten, point again to a common origin still more remote. In this way we may trace a whole family of languages, and with it a kinship of descent, from Hindustan to Ireland. Similarly, another great group of tongues Arabic, Hebrew, etc. shows a branch of the human family spread out from Palestine and Egypt to Morocco.

Now when we come to inquire into the languages of the American Indians for evidence of their relationship to other peoples we are struck with this fact: we cannot connect the languages of America with those of any other part of the world. This is a very notable circumstance. The languages of Europe and Asia are, as it were, dovetailed together, and run far and wide into Africa. From Asia eastward, through the Malay tongues, a connection may be traced even with the speech of the Maori of New Zealand, and with that of the remotest islanders of the Pacific. But similar attempts to connect American languages with the outside world break down. There are found in North America, from the Arctic to Mexico, some fifty-five groups of languages still existing or recently extinct. Throughout these we may trace the same affinities and relationships that run through the languages of Europe and Asia. We can also easily connect the speech of the natives of North America with that of natives of Central and of South America. Even if we had not the similarities of physical appearance, of tribal customs, and of general manners to argue from, we should be able to say with certainty that the various families of American Indians all belonged to one race. The Eskimos of Northern Canada are not Indians, and are perhaps an exception; it is possible that a connection may be traced between them and the prehistoric cave-men of Northern Europe. But the Indians belong to one great race, and show no connection in language or customs with the outside world. They belong to the American continent, it has been said, as strictly as its opossums and its armadillos, its maize and its golden rod, or any other of its aboriginal animals and plants.

But, here again, we must not conclude too much from the fact that the languages of America have no relation to those of Europe and Asia. This does not show that men originated separately on this continent. For even in Europe and Asia, where no one supposes that different races sprung from wholly separate beginnings, we find languages isolated in the same way. The speech of the Basques in the Pyrenees has nothing in common with the European families of languages.

We may, however, regard the natives of America as an aboriginal race, if any portion of mankind can be viewed as such. So far as we know, they are not an offshoot, or a migration, from any people of what is called the Old World, although they are, like the people of the other continents, the descendants of a primitive human stock.

We may turn to geology to find how long mankind has lived on this continent. In a number of places in North and South America are found traces of human