Chapter 1

First Nations

In This Chapter

- The Iroquois Confederacy terrorizes its neighbours
- The Plains Indians create a Hollywood legend
- The Pacific Coast Nations try to figure out what to do with all their wealth
- The Inuit of the Far North adapt to a harsh environment

Canada has fifty-five founding nations rather than just the two that have been officially recognized.

— historian Olive Dickason

The first Canadians — the very first — arrived in prehistoric times when low sea levels created a temporary land bridge (dubbed "Beringia") between Asia and Alaska. Early hunters, following the woolly mammoth, migrated overland into North America. When exactly this happened, no one is quite sure. Estimates range wildly from 100,000 to 10,000 years ago, depending on which expert you consult. The most commonly accepted view is that the first humans arrived roughly 15,000 years ago, with the oldest confirmed cultural site in the Americas being 13,350 years old (though sites in Alaska and Yukon suggest human occupation as long as 20,000 to 25,000 years ago). Either way, it was a long, long, long time ago: long before the birth of Christ, long before the pyramids were built, long before Moses led his people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

So, to say, as some do, that "we are all immigrants to Canada, even the Indians" is a gross distortion to say the least. Surely, any group whose roots in Canada go back to before the days of the pharaohs has a legitimate claim at being considered our "original" inhabitants and "first" nations. Indeed, when you hear commentators insisting that Native Canadians are "immigrants, same as everybody else," I guarantee you they have a hidden agenda — usually one aimed at trying to undermine Native land claims and treaty rights.

By the time the Europeans showed up, a wide variety of aboriginal societies had long since evolved and spread across every region of North and South America. The diversity was remarkable. In Canada alone, there were more

than 50 separate Native languages, many of which were as different as Chinese and English. Today, only three of these — Cree, Ojibwa, and the Inuktitut language of the Arctic — are in a strong enough position to survive. Entire nations have vanished; entire cultures have been lost.

Slow Collision

Calling the European invasion of Canada "a collision" is a bit misleading. The process occurred as much by stealth as anything, and it took centuries to unfold, with European trade goods often preceding the arrival of the Europeans themselves by several generations.

Trade is good. It allows people to redistribute materials, generate wealth, and improve their quality of life. Complex and long-standing trade routes were already in place among the First Nations long before the Europeans arrived. It is a myth that the Natives, gullible and innocent of the ways of the outside world, traded away valuable furs for trinkets. Far from it. They were notoriously shrewd in their dealings with the Europeans. The metal goods the outsiders brought in — the iron, the weapons, the axes, and especially the cooking pans — revolutionized Native life.

As the various Native societies jostled for position, ambushing, attacking, and attempting to outplay both their neighbours and the newcomers, a great social disruption occurred. This was inevitable: Cultures along trade routes are always transformed, and there is no doubt that European trade goods were both desirable and useful. And remember, the Europeans were also jostling for position. The French, Dutch, and English along the east coast battled it out for access to Native trade.

Not all imports were beneficial. Alcohol wreaked havoc among Native communities, and still does to this day. Native middlemen waged bloody wars of territorial control, and well-intentioned Christian missionaries caused terrible divisions within Native societies.

> *When the white man came, we had the land and they had the Bibles. Now they have the land and we have the Bibles.*
>
> — Chief Dan George

Even more deadly were the infectious diseases that the whites brought with them. The Europeans were crawling with germs, many of which were unknown in the New World. As a result, the First Nations had never developed a resistance to many of the illnesses the Europeans unwittingly introduced. Smallpox, measles, influenza, lung infections, and even the common cold all took a deadly toll on Native societies. Entire populations collapsed. It was a demographic catastrophe.

Here's just one example: The Huron Confederacy in what is now northern Ontario had a population of 25,000 in the year 1600. But once Catholic missionaries and French traders made contact, a smallpox epidemic swept through the Huron community, killing thousands and leaving the population at scarcely 9,000 by 1640 — a shadow of its former greatness. Demoralized, with their population depleted and the missionaries sewing seeds of discord among them (the community was divided between those who had been converted and those who had not), the Huron could no longer maintain their once vast farmlands. Fields were abandoned. Villages sat empty. And the Huron, a once proud and powerful people, were overrun by their Iroquois enemies and destroyed. (See Chapter 3 for more on the Iroquois defeat of the Huron.)

Ethnohistorian Henry Dobyns estimates that the Native population of North America was more than 18 million prior to European contact — a number that fell a whopping 95 percent over the next 130 years. Ninety-five percent, mind you! That was far worse than the Black Death of the bubonic plague in Europe. (Other ethnohistorians support Dobyns's conclusions, though they put the population at around 10 million prior to first contact.)

Not everyone agrees, however. More conservative historians, such as Alfred Kroeber, insist that the North American Native population was no more than one million prior to contact, and that any population decline was "moderate" and only partly due to disease. One thing *is* known from first-hand accounts and eyewitness reports: Disease did sweep through Native communities, did cripple their economies, did destroy their societies, and did leave haunting "ghost camps" in its wake. This awful human toll is not really reflected in any statistic.

Today, there are approximately one million Canadians of aboriginal descent. The government distinguishes among three broad categories: Indian, Inuit, and Métis (mixed ancestry), of which some 655,000 are legally recognized, or *status.* The aboriginal population today has the highest birthrate of any group in Canada. Together, they represent more than 3 percent of the Canadian population — and rising. Theirs is a history interwoven with Canada's, and it is a point worth remembering: This wasn't an empty continent that the Europeans stumbled upon, and it wasn't an empty land that they claimed as their own.

Figure 1-1 shows the distribution of Native Groups in Canada at the time of first contact.

People of the Longhouse

Let's clear up one point of confusion right at the start: The term ***Iroquoian*** refers to the Native people who lived in the St. Lawrence–Great Lakes region. They shared a similar language and culture.

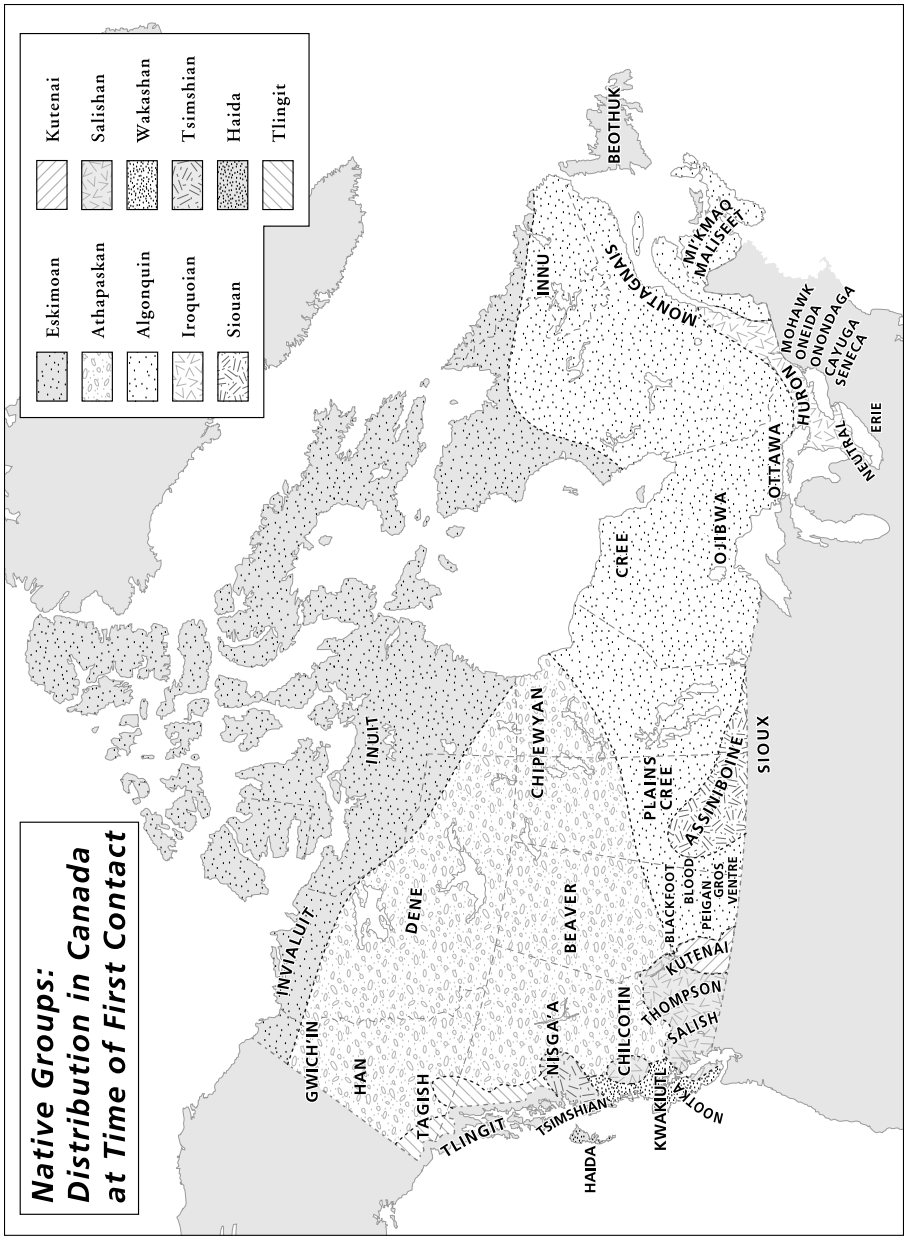


Figure 1-1: Native Groups in Canada.

Among them were the Huron in the Georgian Bay area, the Neutrals in the Niagara region, and the Erie, who lived on the south side of Lake — well, you can probably figure that part out yourself.

The Iroquoian people were the northernmost farmers in North America, living in heavily fortified log-palisade towns and tending large farmland fields. Their communities contained as many as 2,000 people, and they relied heavily on agriculture, especially maize, squash, and beans.

Their lifestyle centred around longhouse dwellings. These longhouses, some reaching almost 100 metres in length, contained the members of an entire extended family: as many as 50 people, living under one common roof. (How they did it, I'll never know. There were seven of us when I was growing up, sharing one bathroom and three bedrooms, and that was tough enough.)

The term ***Iroquois,*** however, usually refers to one specific group of Iroquoian people, namely, the Five Nations who inhabited key lands south of Lake Ontario in what is now New York State. From east to west, the Five Nations were Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca. (They later became the Six Nations when the Tuscarora, a displaced Iroquoian nation from the south, joined them in 1722.)

Together, these Five Nations formed a powerful and important confederacy, one that played a crucial role in the early development of Canada (see Chapters 3 and 5).

The Great Law of Peace

> *[The Iroquois Confederacy] is in fact the oldest democracy on this continent. Its political system, which includes a voice for all and a balance of power between the sexes, existed when Europe still believed in the divine right of kings.*
>
> — author Ronald Wright

The founding of the Iroquois Confederacy (also known as the League of Five Nations) can be traced back fairly accurately to 1451 by a reference to a solar eclipse that occurred in the region — although other sources cite 1570. Either way, by the time the first Europeans arrived, the Confederacy was well established, giving the Iroquois both a united front and considerable political power.

Canada: An Iroquois nation?

Did the Great Law of Peace help to inspire the United States' own Constitution? This is a hotly contested issue that has been raging for more than 20 years. In 1988, the U.S. Senate formally acknowledged "the contributions of the Iroquois Confederacy of Nations to the development of the United States Constitution." But the matter is far from settled, and historians remain strongly divided over the idea.

Did the American Founding Fathers lift some of their ideas from the 117-article constitution of the Iroquois, one that had existed for hundreds of years prior to the American Revolution? Benjamin Franklin, for one, was impressed with what the "ignorant savages" of the Iroquois Confederacy had achieved — namely, the creation of a self-governing union that had "subsisted for ages, and appears indissoluble."

Certainly the Iroquois Confederacy, with its clear division between levels of government, provides a blueprint for the U.S. federal system (that is, states or provinces contained within a larger union). Canada, in turn, based its own version of the two-level federal system largely upon that of the U.S., making Canada — in spirit, anyway — "an Iroquois Nation." However, one aspect of the Iroquois constitution was *not* adopted: women's rights. Canada's Indian Act of 1876 took the vote away from Native women, something they had held for centuries under Iroquois law.

The Confederacy was founded by the semi-mythical Dekanahwideh, a "heavenly messenger" born of virgin birth, who came from the north to bring peace and unity to the Five Nations in a time of great turmoil. The people were caught up in an endless cycle of blood feuds and revenge, and Dekanahwideh — together with his disciple Hiawatha — travelled from nation to nation, urging an end to the conflict. In its place, they proposed a Great Law of Peace that would bring the various nations "under one roof," like the families in a longhouse.

Slowly, and with great public debate, Dekanahwideh and Hiawatha managed to convince each of the five nations to join. The Mohawk were the first to accept, and thus were known as "the elder brothers" of the Confederacy. As a symbol of the new union, Dekanahwideh planted a great white pine, the Tree of Peace, beneath which he buried a war club. The roots of the great tree were depicted as spreading in all directions, and on top of the tree sat an eagle, ever vigilant.

Note: There is no connection between Hiawatha, co-founder of the Iroquois Confederacy, and the character with the same name who appears in the poem *The Song of Hiawatha,* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. (It appears that Longfellow got the real Hiawatha mixed up with the Native folk hero Nanabozho.)

The Great Law of Peace was, in effect, the working constitution of the Iroquois Confederacy. And because the Iroquois, like all First Nations, had no written alphabet, the entire law was passed on orally from one generation to the next for hundreds of years. No small feat, that. It was the equivalent of memorizing a 75,000-word book, longer than many of today's novels. (Imagine having to memorize and recite *The English Patient* — again and again.)

As a memory aid, elders used a system of woven bands of shells, called wampum belts, to help guide their recitations. The centrally located Onondaga were designated the "wampum keepers," making them, in today's terms, the keepers of the public archives.

Romans of the New World

The Iroquois Nations have been dubbed "the Romans of the New World." They imposed their will upon a vast expanse of territory, they waged a series of apocalyptic wars against their neighbours, and they fought the French to a standstill. Feared in battle and ruthless in victory, the Five Nations eventually overran and destroyed all of their Iroquoian neighbours: the Huron, the Neutral, the Petun, the Mahican, and the Erie. Crippled by smallpox epidemics and demoralized by the constant attacks, one by one they fell under the might of the Iroquois Confederacy.

A confusion of names

The Mohawk aren't the only Native group to get their name confused or misapplied. The Huron referred to themselves as the Wendat. (Huron came from French slang meaning "ruffian" or "scruffy.") And, of course, the term "Indian" itself is a misnomer, mistakenly applied by Columbus in 1492 when he thought he had landed in the Indies.

Because this book is meant as a beginner's guide, I have used the more common or familiar versions of Native names. These are the ones you are more likely to encounter (in the same way that you will encounter "Germany" more often than Deutschland, or "Japan" more often than Nippon).

Here are some other examples:

Region	Common name	Actual name
Maritimes	Maliseet	Welustuk
Northern Woods	Ojibwa Chipewyan	Anishinabe Dene
Plains	Blackfoot Sioux	Siksika Dakota/Lakota
Pacific Coast	Nootka	Nuu'chah'nulth

History as living artifact: False Faces and corn husk masks

Two distinctive types of mask, one woven from husks and the other carved directly into a living tree and then "freed," were central to Iroquoian healing rituals. The wooden False Face masks were often wildly and even comically distorted, with bent noses and protruding lips. Along with the more abstract husk masks, they represented good spirits with magical curative powers. At various times of the year, members of the False Face Society would visit homes, dancing, chanting, and tending to the ill — and in return they would receive offerings of tobacco and corn meal.

These masks have a deep religious significance even now, and they still play a key role in the ceremonies of today's Iroquois traditionalists, who are often upset at seeing False Faces displayed in public museums. Less reverential Iroquois entrepreneurs carve "false faces" for sale as souvenirs. To be authentic, these masks must be cut from living wood and blessed with a ceremonial burning of tobacco. When I asked a Mohawk carver recently whether the tourist-bought False Face masks have been properly sanctified in this manner, he just smiled . . .

Whenever Iroquoian warriors (Five Nations, Huron, and Neutral alike) captured prisoners in battle, they tortured them in a gruesome, prolonged, public spectacle that could last for days, after which the captors performed ritualized cannibalism, eating the heart of the captive if he had been particularly brave.

Of the Iroquois, none had as fierce or as feared a reputation as the Mohawk. Indeed, Mohawk is not their original name. They called themselves Kahniakehaka, "People of the Flint Country." But to their long-suffering neighbours, they were *mowak* — "eaters of men." The name, rendered by Europeans as "Mohawk," has stuck ever since, so much so that it is even used by today's Mohawk when referring to themselves.

Clan mothers and faithkeepers

Like the Vikings, the Iroquois, although fearsome in battle, had a quiet home life. Their society was remarkably stable and well integrated. Iroquoian cultures were *matrilineal*. That is, both the larger clans and the extended families of the longhouse traced their descent along their mothers' side. Women wielded real power: Women owned the land (or, more accurately,

acted as "caretakers"), and men protected it. The chiefs may have been men, but the women held the balance of power. (The Clan Mothers chose the members of the Grand Council of Chiefs and if any leader failed to follow the dictates of the Great Law, he could be removed by the Clan Mothers.)

The Iroquois, in essence, lived in a representative democracy, with votes given to the delegates of each Nation, and a unanimous decision needed to go to war (although the Nations often went to war separately as well). The main town of the Onondaga, the largest and most central of the Nations, acted as the capital of the Confederacy, a hub community where diplomacy and long-term strategy were hammered out.

Along with the Council of Chiefs and the Clan Mothers, Iroquois society also had a system of Faithkeepers and shamans responsible for attending to the spiritual and health-related needs of the community. The distinction between medicine and magic was never clearly drawn, and the same healer who had an encyclopedic knowledge of herbs would also exorcise evil spirits from ill bodies.

People of the North Woods

The forests of the Canadian Shield cut an immense swath across Canada, from what is now northern Québec, across Ontario, all the way to the Northwest Territories. In the north woods, the soil is thin and the land is rugged. Unlike their southern Iroquoian neighbours, the people of Canada's north woods lived a nomadic life based around small kinship bands. They were neither farmers nor politically united. Indeed, decentralization was the key to their survival. They lived in domed, bark-covered structures known as wigwams, which held only one or two families.

Two broad language groups are found in this vast area:

- In the northwest, the ***Athapaskan*** (including the Kutchin, Dogrib, Beaver, and Chipewyan — all of whom are also referred to as Dene).
- In the southeast, the ***Algonquian*** (including the Cree, Ojibwa, Ottawa, and on the Atlantic coast, the Maliseet and Mi'kmaq).

On the coast

Although the Algonquian language group was located mainly in the northern woodlands, it did stretch all the way to the Atlantic. The Mi'kmaq (also spelled *Micmac*) were the dominant Native group in what is now the Maritimes. They

lived in semi-nomadic communities along the coast from Gaspé to Nova Scotia, and later migrated to Newfoundland as well. The Mi'kmaq were among the very first Native groups to encounter the Europeans, and as such, were the first to experience the upheaval and displacement that inevitably followed.

The Mi'kmaq, along with the Maliseet in the Bay of Fundy region, befriended the early French settlers and allied themselves against the British. The British, in response, waged a brutal but unsuccessful war of extermination against them. (See Chapter 6 for more on this period.) Governor Cornwallis, the founder of Halifax, put a bounty on Mi'kmaq scalps and even brought in Mohawk mercenaries to help "eradicate" them. This is one of the reasons the present-day Mi'kmaq were less than enthusiastic when the City of Halifax decided to celebrate its Founding Father a few years ago.

The canoe as Canadian icon

The Natives of the north woods, and the Ojibwa in particular, were renowned for their elegant yet practical river-going craft. The birchbark canoe — light, easily repaired, and able to carry heavy loads — made extensive trade possible. It was the canoe that opened up the interior of Canada. Like the snowshoe and the toboggan, the birchbark canoe is a wonder of adaptive technology. And Canada, explored and exploited largely by river, was a nation born of the canoe. Ours is a country that was opened up by dogged explorers and foolhardy fur traders who rode rivers and crossed lakes and fought their way through white waters to reach the interior.

From the image of the early voyageurs in their great flotillas to former prime minister Pierre Trudeau, paddling with the current in buckskin and beads, the image of the canoe, and the communion with nature that it suggests, has been adopted — or appropriated, depending on your point of view — by Canadians as a whole.

> *Canada is a canoe route.*
>
> — aphorism attributed to historian Arthur Lower

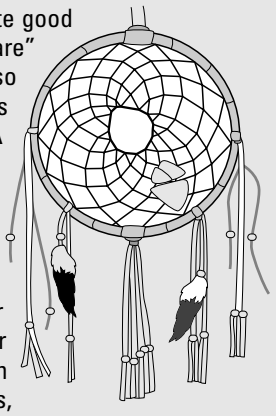
The wild man of the forest

For the Iroquois, cannibalism was a war ritual. But for the subsistence-level small-band societies of the northern woods, where starvation was a constant and real danger, cannibalism was looked upon with horror as the final breakdown of order. The most dreaded figure in Cree and Ojibwa mythology

History as living artifact: The dreamcatcher

Central to the Ojibwa way of life was the Midewiwin religion, in which it was believed that the Earth was a living, interconnected whole. Every plant and animal contained a life force, and this in turn was connected to the concept of *Manitou*, usually translated as "Great Spirit" or, more accurately, as simply "Mystery." It refers to the unseen realities of life, beyond human understanding, but always present and very real. (The province of Manitoba is named in reference to this.)

Dreams were a contact point between the everyday world and the Manitou, and one of the best known Ojibwa artifacts — and one that has been adopted by other First Nations as well — is the dreamcatcher. Who knows, you may even have one hanging above your bed. They have become very popular lately, though not everyone who buys one understands its underlying significance.



Dreamcatchers invite good dreams in and "ensnare" bad ones. They also protect against illness and evil spirits. A baby's first protective talisman was a dreamcatcher, an intricate and finely woven web adorned with feathers, either owl (for wisdom) or eagle (for courage). In most dreamcatchers, a hole in the centre is left open to allow the good dreams to pass through, while blocking the bad ones. (In other Native cultures, it is just the opposite: The hole allows bad ideas and dreams to pass through and "catches" the good ones.)

was the Windigo, an evil spirit who took possession of people's souls and led them into wild, anti-social behaviour — especially cannibalism. For some commentators, the Windigo has also come to represent a darker, underlying fear that has haunted non-Native Canadians for years: the image of a person who, "having spent too long in the wilderness, becomes a part of it." Northrop Frye saw this as a symptom of a larger "garrison mentality," a sense of living under siege, surrounded by the forces of nature. A very Canadian neurosis.

A northern empire

The Ojibwa (also Ojibwe and Ojibway) were the primary middlemen in the aboriginal fur trade, and they controlled the widest Native territory north of Mexico. The Ojibwa were, in their own way, "the Romans of the north woods." Part of a coalition known as the Council of the Three Fires, the Ojibwa moved south after the Fall of the Huron Confederacy, and later pushed west as well, displacing the Sioux — no small feat, considering what worthy opponents the

Sioux were. In the words of historian J.M. MacDonald, the Ojibwa controlled "one of the largest Indian territories in history — an empire that stretched from southern Ontario and Wisconsin to Saskatchewan and western Montana." The Ojibwa are also sometimes referred to as "Chippewa," which gets really confusing because it sounds so similar to Chipewyan, which is an Athapaskan Native group with no connection to the Ojibwa.

People of the Plains

Quick! Close your eyes and — wait, don't close your eyes. Instead, just picture in your mind an "Indian." Odds are, you conjured up an image of someone from the plains, probably Sioux, dressed in buckskin, wearing a feathered headdress, perhaps riding a horse and firing a rifle at buffalo or — even better — at the U.S. Cavalry. The Plains Indians are, after all, the stuff of Hollywood mythmaking. These are the *Dances with Wolves* Indians, the ones who have come to represent the image of Native North Americans as a whole. Which makes it all the more ironic that the short-lived heyday of the Plains Indians was made possible almost solely because of two items introduced by the Europeans: the horse and the repeating rifle.

Of these, the horse was by far the more important. First acquired from Spaniards far to the south, they were traded north, arriving in the Canadian West in the mid-1700s. The horse changed everything. It gave the Indians greater freedom, greater speed, and better mobility. It also allowed them to expand the range of the hunt — and the range of their wars. With the horse, the People of the Plains attained a brief and brilliant ascendancy, one that lasted just a little over 100 years, but that would burn itself forever into the popular imagination. (The Spanish actually *re-introduced* the horse to the New World. Horses had existed in North America in pre-historic times, but had long-since been hunted into extinction.)

On the high plains, the most powerful presence was that of the Blackfoot Confederacy. The Confederacy waged war with and against the Plains Cree and Assiniboine to the north and east, and the Sioux and Crow to the south. It was an austere, militant culture, one described by historian Arthur Ray as "extremely macho." If the Iroquois were the Romans of the New World, the Plains Indians were the Spartans.

The buffalo hunt

The People of the Plains were hunters. Their homes — tipis of raised poles and hides — could be taken down and put up quickly, and the mainstay of both their diet and their way of life was the buffalo. Great herds roamed the

plains, often covering the horizon, and the buffalo (or, more correctly, *bison*) provided meat, robes, glue, sinew, and bowstrings. The hides were used for tipis, blankets, moccasins, and portable "bull boats" used in crossing streams. The dried dung was used for fuel. The ribs were used as sled runners, the hollowed horns as drinking goblets, the bladders as water bags and the tails as flyswatters. It was once estimated that the Plains Indians had over 300 different uses for buffalo. The buffalo were, in a way, "walking supermarkets."

Now, there were several ways to kill them. You could build a long fenced-in area that was wide on one end and narrowed toward the other, a "buffalo pound," and then corral the animals into it. Or you could ride alongside them and shoot them full of arrows, a difficult and dangerous undertaking. Or you could simply run them off a cliff.

At one cliff site in southwestern Alberta the bones lie more than ten metres deep. Named "Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump" (not in reference to the buffalo but rather to an unfortunate — and not very bright — young Native lad who one day decided to watch the hunt from directly *below* the cliffs), this site had been used for more than 5,000 years. In 1981, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) declared Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump a World Heritage Site.

Waste not, want not . . .

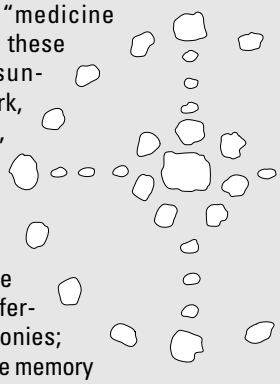
The buffalo hunt required discipline, skill, and patience, but the payoff was well worth it. The average buffalo weighs over 900 kilograms, and a good kill could bring in as many as 250 animals, producing — almost literally — a mountain of meat.

Even with drying, pounding, and skinning, a good deal of the meat ended up rotting under the hot prairie sun. (This was before refrigeration, remember.) As well, the Plains Indians believed they had to kill an entire herd, otherwise the survivors might escape and warn their fellow buffalo. So the notion that Native Canadians were holistic environmentalists in tune with nature is a wee bit exaggerated. They were hunters, they weren't park rangers.

However, the Native buffalo hunt pales in comparison to the wholesale slaughter undertaken by whites. In 1800, there were an estimated 60 million buffalo roaming North America from Mexico to Northern Alberta. By 1889, only 800 were left. This wasn't a hunt, this was carnage, what one commentator called "an orgy of marksmanship." Whites shot hundreds of buffalo a day, skinning the humps and leaving the rest to rot where they lay. There was also a darker intent behind the slaughter: The near-extinction of the buffalo, achieved with tacit government approval, crippled Native independence on the Plains. The real target was always the First Nations, not the buffalo. It was a ruthless strategy. And it worked.

History as living artifact: Medicine wheels

Although it's easy to miss, history is everywhere on the prairies — if you know where to look. The Plains Indians left thousands of stone markings across the plains. Dubbed "medicine wheels" by puzzled whites, these circle patterns, made of sun-bleached stones, radiate a stark, symmetrical beauty. Some, constructed by the Blackfoot, commemorate important battles. Others mark territory and serve as a warning to encroaching outsiders. Some are of a spiritual nature, in reference to Sun Dance ceremonies; others were made to honour the memory of great warriors who died in battle. Simply put, medicine wheels are geography made sacred.



Of North America's 150 known medicine wheels, 125 are in southern Alberta and Saskatchewan. Many of them date back thousands of years and are older than Stonehenge, older than the pyramids. And almost every known medicine wheel has been vandalized at some point, by New Age tourists, crass souvenir seekers, or picnickers who rearrange the stones to spell out their initials.

The medicine bundle

Among the Blackfoot and the Plains Cree, the most sacred belonging was one's "medicine bundle," a small pouch containing bones, sacred stones, amulets, and magical objects. These bundles were sanctified by medicine men and renewed constantly, but the contents remained protected and secret.

In 1987, when a museum in Alberta wanted to put a medicine bundle on display, there was an outcry from the Plains Indians. After long debate and much discussion among the elders, it was finally decided that the Blackfoot Nation would provide the museum with a *replica* of a medicine bag — clearly labelled as such — that would contain a few key errors in its design and, more importantly, would be empty inside. Not all aspects of Native culture are meant for public consumption. More recently, in 2000, the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, which has acted as a caretaker of many Native icons and rituals, announced that it would be returning the medicine bundles and other sacred objects in its collection to the First Nations from which they came.

The Sun Dance

Fewer coming-of-age rituals were tougher than the Sun Dance. Forget bar mitzvahs. These young men had a real ordeal to pass through. The Sun Dance (more accurately, the "Thirsting Dance") took place in mid-summer, usually after a buffalo hunt, and it involved feasting, chanting, conjuring, and rhythmic, hypnotic dancing that could last for days at a time. The most striking aspect was the rite of passage performed by the young men. In a display of physical endurance, they would insert skewers through their chest muscles and then attach themselves by a cord to a central pole. Under the punishing sun, in slow circles, the boys would turn and turn, leaning back against the skewers until they eventually ripped themselves free.

It should be noted that this ceremony was (a) only part of the larger Sun Dance, and (b) completely voluntary. No one was required to undergo the ordeal, but those who did bore their scars with great pride for the rest of their lives. (And come to think of it, something like this would certainly make bar mitzvahs more entertaining. *"Today I am a man . . . Ouch!"*) In the 1890s, the federal government decided to crush the Sun Dance. What had once been the central ceremony and most important ritual in Plains culture was driven underground and made illegal. It was like outlawing Thanksgiving.

People of the Pacific Northwest

From the austere landscape of the plains, I take you now to the Pacific Northwest. What a contrast! Here, amid the lush rainforests and wet green fjords and islands of the west coast, some of the most rich and complex Native societies evolved. Far from the subsistence lifestyles of the plains and the arctic, the people of the coast enjoyed abundant food and a relatively mild climate. They had lots of leisure time and a great deal of excess wealth. So much wealth, in fact, that it was a challenge at times just to dispose of it.

The Pacific Northwest was the most densely populated area of Canada. It has been estimated that almost *half* of Canada's total Native population was living in British Columbia at the time of first contact. More than 30 languages were spoken here, making it one of the most linguistically diverse areas anywhere on earth. And two of the languages (Haida and Tlingit) are isolates: unique and unrelated to any others. Imagine having Chinese spoken on one island, Portuguese on the next, and Swahili on the coast and you have an idea just how remarkable this region was — and is.

History as living artifact: The totem pole

Totem poles frightened and fascinated early European visitors, who assumed the poles represented pagan gods (or even demons) that were meant to be worshipped and appeased. In fact, most totem poles display the symbols and stories of a specific clan. They often acted like a family's coat of arms. They were also public displays of wealth, and the number and size of poles a house could raise was a matter of social esteem. Elaborate poles, some as tall as 20 metres and weighing up to four tonnes, were sunk into the ground and raised by ropes to great public acclaim and joyous celebration. There was a certain phallic pride involved as well. (One Nass River chief forced a rival to shorten his totem pole, not once but twice, a move meant to both humiliate and emasculate.) Some were even erected as "ridicule poles" designed to mock and shame debtors.

Totem poles originated among the Nisga'a of the Tsimishian and were later refined by the Kwakiutl, who added the outspread wings of the thunderbird. Mortuary poles containing boxes with the bodies of deceased chiefs were also raised. And among the Haida, portals to the house were often through entrance poles, all carved in the softwood cedar that was so indispensable to the culture of the coastal nations. (Indeed, they were as much a "people of the cedar" as they were a "people of the salmon.") Although most of the old stands of totem poles are now crumbling into ruin and neglect, or have been uprooted and moved indoors, the art of the totem has not died, and new poles continue to be carved by West Coast craftsmen.

Among the many First Nation groupings of the Pacific Northwest are the Haida of the Queen Charlotte Islands; the Tlingit of the Alaska Panhandle region; the Tsimishian of the Nass and Skeena Rivers; the Kwakiutl along the middle coast; the Bella Coola enclave further inland; the Coast Salish of the Vancouver region; and the Nootka on the west coast of Vancouver Island. (These are only the major cultural and linguistic groupings; they can be further divided into separate nations. It's a long list.)

Of noblemen and slaves

Unlike almost all other Native groups, the concept of private ownership was both central and explicit among the coastal societies. When white traders began arriving in the late 1700s they were annoyed to discover that every square foot of land belonged to *someone,* and that fishing and hunting rights were clearly delineated. The taking of firewood, or even fresh water, required payment of some kind. No New Age socialist brotherhood here.

The Coastal chiefs were often vain and acquisitive, with their material wealth the key to their status. The people of the Pacific Northwest lived in a grand style, in wide plank houses 150 metres long supported by massive, decorated cedar beams. The size and splendour of the houses were duly noted and compared, and each house had its own history and even its own name. These were often unabashedly proud: *House Which Thunder Rolls Across, House That Other Chiefs Peer at from a Distance*, or — my personal favourite — *House People Are Ashamed to Look at as It Is So Overpoweringly Great.*

Elaborate social structures evolved. Unlike the communal lifestyles of other Native groups, the coastal societies had a *caste system*, that is, one made up of several distinct and formal social classes. At the top were the nobles, from which the chiefs were drawn. Below them were the commoners. And below them were the slaves, usually taken as captives from neighbouring nations. (In some villages, the slaves made up a third of the population.) As well, among the Nootka of Vancouver Island, the whale hunters were elevated to almost mystical status as a separate class to themselves. They lived apart prior to the hunt and engaged in ritualized bathing and cleansing before boarding the long boats and heading out to sea.

But, most importantly, the coastal societies were able to support a whole sub-class of professional artists who apprenticed under masters and who studied their craft for years. The art of the Pacific Northwest is unparalleled: the fluid, stylized designs; the sublime shades of emotion in the masks; the whale fluke representing the whale, the beak representing the raven; the intricate interwoven patterns. It is one of the richest artistic traditions in the world. On the Pacific Coast, art and life were completely intertwined.

The culture and philosophy of the potlatch

The raising of a totem pole, the ascension of a new chief, or a marriage between nobles: Such events as these were marked by celebrations we call *potlatch,* a word derived in a roundabout way from the Nootka verb "to give." And boy, when they said "give," they weren't kidding. Artwork, food, slaves, cedar chests, land titles (that is, the right to fish or hunt on the host's land for a specified period of time), blankets, and sheets of decorative copper: Guests at a potlatch often returned so laden down with gifts that extra canoes had to be provided just to carry it all.

You see, the people of the Pacific Northwest had a very refined concept of wealth. They recognized something the Europeans did not: True wealth lies not in the amount one is able to hoard, but rather in the amount one is capable of *giving away*. Lavish gift-giving increases one's status. It was a case of "conspicuous generosity," as opposed to conspicuous consumption, a battle of vanity and pride. At some of these more ruthless ceremonies, riches were actually destroyed. Canoes were sunk, blankets were casually thrown into the

fire, copper tossed away, and slaves killed on a whim and for the slightest offence: all as evidence of the host's great wealth. (Potlatches must have been an especially nerve-racking time for slaves. "Why I am so rich, I can . . . well, let me see . . . Bob! Get over here!")

Potlatches served an important economic function as well. They were both a way of redistributing wealth and a subtle form of banking. After all, a potlatch had to be returned, and a village that gave one now would receive one later, often with "interest" since the responding potlatch would have to be, as a matter of honour, larger and richer than the first. This complicated web of "favours given" and "favours received" also helped promote social continuity.

The impact of white society on the potlatch

The potlatch was a synthesis of coastal life: celebratory, abundant, status-conscious, and artistic. However, with the introduction of European trade goods, the nature of the potlatch changed forever. Sewing machines, jewellery, and clocks were added to the list of gifts. Wealth became less evenly distributed, and tribes with trade connections gave away gifts that others could never repay. Social debt meant social shame. Tensions rose. Among the Kwakiutl it took a distinctly nasty turn when chiefs set out to ruin rivals by inviting them to a potlatch and then piling an outrageous amount of gifts on them. The rival was forced to up the ante and the escalating war of gift-giving continued until one or the other was broken by it and reduced to poverty, with a dark cloud of unrepaid favours hanging over his name.

Missionaries complained that the potlatch was an obstacle to the proper "Christianization" of the coastal people. And in 1884, the Government of Canada, appalled at the "debauchery" and the "blatant disregard" for material wealth that the potlatch represented, outlawed the ceremony entirely and drove it underground. Giving gifts had become a crime. The initial laws were strengthened over the years, with the 1927 version of the Indian Act making potlatches an offence punishable by six months in prison. Potlatch ceremonies remained illegal in Canada until 1951.

Caught in Between: People of the Plateau

The semi-arid, high plateau of the British Columbia interior is a land of raging rivers, rolling hills, sagebrush deserts, sharp valleys, and sudden steep mountain ranges. In fact, calling it a plateau is a bit misleading.

Some of the First Nations in this region, such as the Kutenai (also spelled *Kootenay*) had originally been Plains Indians, but had been pushed back, into the mountains, by relentless Blackfoot attacks. At least, that's the version of events the Blackfoot like to tell. The Kutenai insist a smallpox epidemic wiped out their plains cousins and left them stranded in the highlands. The Kutenai, a language isolate, were certainly more plains than mountain. They were a warrior society with no clans, no caste system, and no complex social hierarchy — and year after year they would return to the grasslands to take part in the buffalo hunt.

The Interior Salish, meanwhile, had entered the plateau the other way, moving inland from the Pacific Coast. In a sense, the Interior Salish are "river cousins," to the coastal nations. They adapted well to life in a harsher climate. They travelled in small, semi-nomadic bands and dwelled in pit houses, dug partly into the ground and often entered from the top. The Interior Salish hunted deer and fished the salmon-rich waters of the Thompson, Columbia, and Fraser Rivers.

They are also responsible for the modern legend of the Ogopogo, a monster seen regularly splashing about in the waters of Lake Okanagan. To the People of the Interior, it is *N'ha-a-itk*, a mythical figure represented in pre-contact petroglyphs. Far from the tourist-friendly version of Ogopogo that you see promoted on postcards and T-shirts today, N'ha-a-itk was a fearsome creature who would occasionally surface to pull men and animals under water in its jaws. The Native people in the area used to offer small, writhing animals as a sacrifice to the monster, but that doesn't look as good on postcards. *Suggested tourist motto*: "Take a dip in Lake Okanagan! You'll probably escape with your life!" (The modern Sasquatch, dubbed "Big Foot" in the U.S., can also be traced back to Native mythology, in this case a wild, hairy creature of Coast Salish lore. Which is to say, the legends of the First Nations have entered the public imagination.)

People of the Far North

The Inuit of Canada's Arctic inhabit one of the harshest and most unforgiving environments on earth. The winters are long and dark, the winds fierce, the summers short, and the resources scarce. It is the outer limit of the habitable world. (The Arctic was, in fact, the very last region on earth to be inhabited by humans.)

Crossing over from Siberia some 4,000 to 5,000 years ago, today's Inuit are part of a larger, transpolar culture. Although there are eight separate Inuit tribal groups in Canada, they all speak dialects of a common language: Inuktitut.

(The Inuktitut language crosses several national boundaries, stretching from eastern Siberia, across Alaska and northern Canada, all the way to Greenland, creating a remarkable international linguistic community.)

Inuit contact with the outside world was fleeting until well into the twentieth century. Before that, the only whites they encountered were rough Yankee whalers, desperate English explorers lost in a sea of ice, and, long before that, the occasional surly Viking. Not that first contact was any less traumatic for the Inuit. The Sadlermiut Inuit living on the northwestern shores of Hudson Bay (their culture seems to have been archaic and possibly unique among the Inuit) were completely wiped out by disease after the first whalers came through. The last Sadlermiut died in 1903, and the mystery of their origins remains.

The current population of Canada's Inuit is around 40,000 and many of them still hunt regularly, though most travel by snowmobile now, not dogsled. (Which may be faster, true. But if you get stranded and run out of food, you can't eat your Ski-Doo.)

Northern hunters

The Inuit were hunters, first and foremost: caribou, musk-oxen, whales, waterfowl, seals, and even polar bears, which are one of the few animals in North America that (a) have no natural enemies, and (b) aren't the least bit afraid of us. (Polar bears have even been known to stalk and attempt to prey on humans, and the Inuit have to be careful lest the hunters become the hunted. Inuit trackers often circle back to look for paw prints to make sure that no polar bears are following them.)

Moving seasonally from one camp to another, the Inuit would gather in groups of up to 100 in the winter. Summer hunting groups, travelling light, were usually fewer than a dozen. It was a small-scale but highly sociable society, where the emphasis was on sharing resources (up to and including spouses).

A further confusion of terms

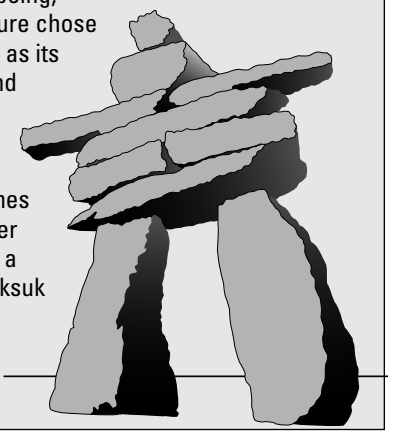
The term *Eskimo* was originally derived from an Algonquian word, *eskipot,* meaning "eaters of raw meat," which was considered an insult. Today, the word *Eskimo* has largely been replaced with Inuit, meaning simply "people." Even so, the term *Inuit* only really refers to the people in the eastern Canadian Arctic. In the western area around the Mackenzie Delta, they prefer the term *Inuvialuit.* But to avoid confusion, and with apologies to the Inuvialuit, I'll be using Inuit as a general term throughout. (In northern Alaska, meanwhile, they prefer *Inupiat* . . .)

History as living artifact: The inuksuk

The Arctic above the treeline is beautiful but barren. The open tundra stretches out from horizon to horizon without distinguishing landmarks, and hunters travelling across this open landscape, often for great distances, need some kind of markers along the way. As guideposts, the Inuit erected stone cairns, called *inuksuk*, "that which stands in for a man" (also spelled "inukshuk"). Carefully stacked inuksuk can withstand the worst winds and the heaviest snowfalls. In the Arctic, there are lichen-covered inuksuk that have stood for hundreds of years — and more.

Inuksuk come in all sorts of shapes and sizes and serve a number of purposes. Gate-shaped cairns, built in a line across the landscape, serve as aids for navigation: You look through and line up the next one in the distance. Smaller ones, adorned with flapping scarecrow-like sprigs of arctic heather, help to herd caribou toward accessible hunting grounds. Some inuksuk point the way to food caches.

Others serve as warnings for dangerous terrain. Some indicate kayak-launching sites, and others were built as memorials to a person's memory. Each has its own distinct style and name, and its own distinct purpose — my favourite being the one called *inuksuk quviasuktuq*, "inuksuk built for the sheer joy of it." In 1999, when the Inuit territory of Nunavut was called into being, the legislature chose the inuksuk as its emblem. And the organizers of the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver also chose a stylized inuksuk as their Olympic logo.



Central to the Inuit way of life was the caribou. Like the buffalo to the Plains Indians, the caribou was a "walking supermarket": It provided meat for food, fat for candles, hides for kayaks and summer tents, skins for bedding, bones for tools, and sinew for sewing. Even diapers were usually made from caribou skins.

Further examples of Inuit ingenuity

Here are more important contributions made by the Inuit:

- **Igloo:** The traditional winter dwelling of the Inuit, the snowhouse igloo is a structural marvel. Sliced blocks of fine-grained, compact snow are built up from the inside, in a narrowing, inward-leaning spiral. A final, all-important "keystone" block is nudged into place and a small hole cut for ventilation. In little more than an hour, a single hunter can create a

self-standing dome of surprising strength. After watching an igloo being constructed, the English explorer John Franklin, amazed at the purity of the material and the elegance of its design, compared it to a Grecian temple. "Both," he noted, "are triumphs of art."

- **Parka:** Where would Canadians be without their parkas, eh? The original Inuit parka, made of caribou hide and often trimmed with fur, effectively sealed the wearer inside. Parkas were waterproof, wind-resistant, and durable. In one of the coldest climates on earth, the Inuit discovered a way to use their own body warmth to full adavantage. The Inuit parka has been compared to the spacesuits NASA developed. (I like that: spacesuits in a Grecian temple.)
- **Kayak:** If the birchbark canoe is the glory of the Ojibwa, then the glory of the Inuit is certainly the kayak. Made from skins stretched over a frame and ranging up to seven metres in length, the kayak are ideal for fast, sea-going journeys. Once seated inside his kayak, the Inuit hunter attaches his parka around the opening, sealing himself in and making the kayak both watertight and virtually unsinkable. If the kayak tips over, the hunter is able to flip it back up and resurface.
- **Umiak:** Although the sleeker, sexier kayak gets more attention, equally important was the broader-based, flat-bottomed umiak boat. These work-a-day vessels were used to transport families and supplies along coastal waters during the summer hunting season. Umiaks could carry more than 20 people at a time.