

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Sweet Promises: A Reader on Indian/White Relations in Canada. Edited by J. R. Miller.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4cr8w3dn>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 16(4)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Adams, Howard

**Publication Date**

1992-09-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

do not make for cheering reading. It should be pointed out, however, that much of the information is dated. This is not to say that the conditions described no longer exist, but today there is, at least, less tendency to sweep them under the rug. There is a growing awareness that, in spite of all of Canada's social achievements, no grounds for complacency exist, nor are they ever likely to exist. Changing conditions give rise to new challenges, a process to which all human societies are subject. One can hope, however, that someday the famous "level playing field" will be as available for aboriginals as it is for whites.

*Olive Patricia Dickason*  
University of Alberta

**Sweet Promises: A Reader on Indian/White Relations in Canada.**  
Edited by J. R. Miller. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 1991. \$24.95 (Canadian) paper.

J. R. Miller has edited and assembled twenty-five essays on Indian-white relations in Canada, mostly by historians. They are reprints of previous publications. In his introduction, Miller claims, "Readers of the following essays . . . can learn a great deal, both about the evolution of Indian-white relations in Canada, and about the ways in which anthropologists, historians and others have interpreted that pattern." As a reviewer, however, I did not find this to be the case. Instead, most of the essays were written from a strictly Eurocentric viewpoint and with traditional distortions of aboriginal history. According to Miller, "studies of Indian-white relations after Confederation have thus far proved largely resistant to reinterpretation. It is now time for another look at Canada's (history)." Hence, interpretation is the emphasis of the text. The reader expects revised, if not new, interpretations. However, the book is a disappointment in this respect. It is not surprising when one examines the names of the authors of the essays; with few exceptions, they are traditional, white supremacy academics who make liberal use of stereotypes and distortions.

Most of the essays have the tone of attempting to justify European conquest, dispossession of Indians and their land and resources, and the early atrocities. Josephy states, "The European conquest of the Americas has been termed one of the darkest chapters of human history . . . No one will ever know how many

Indians or how many tribes were enslaved, tortured, debauched, and killed" (*The Indian Heritage of America*, 1972, p. 278). Although the essays in *Sweet Promises* de-emphasize racism and stereotypes, particularly in language, they nevertheless portray white supremacy and distortions. The basic theme of the text is inclined to be George Stanley's view: civilization versus primitiveness. Stanley's writings and interpretation are considered by white academics to be the "gospel truth" of Indian and Métis history. Not only is a chapter by Stanley included, but Miller states, "The earliest, and still the best, treatment of the rebellion as the clash of two ways of life is G. F. G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada*." This book is considered by many aboriginal students to be one of the most racist and devastating treatises on Indian/Métis history and culture. Stanley is not subtle in his view of aboriginal people. He claims that "the savage, centuries behind in mental and economic development, cannot readily adapt himself to meet new conditions" (*The Birth of Western Canada*, 1963, p. 194). To Stanley, Euro-Canadians are genetically superior to aboriginal people: "There was in the half-breed mentality an inherent opposition to any political or economic change in Rupert's Land . . . . A primitive people, the half-breeds were bound to give way before the march of a more progressive people . . . . It was . . . their inability to adjust themselves to the new order . . . ." (Stanley, p. 49). Of the Indians, Stanley claims, "The savage . . . is incapable of bridging the gap of centuries alone and unassisted" (Stanley, p. 194). Although there have been volumes of new research and publications on Indian/Métis history since Stanley's book was published fifty-five years ago, it is still the classic text for white supremacy academics.

Of the twenty-five essays, only three are written by native authors. Stan Cuthand's "The Native Peoples of the Prairie Provinces in the 1920's and 1930's" is refreshing compared to the academic ones, as well as being highly informative. It is noticeable to the reader at once for its lack of Eurocentrism. Cuthand has written on a topic about which he has considerable personal information. Although it is a neglected area, it is an important period in the history of Indians. It is reasonable to assume that this chapter is free from racism, stereotypes, and distortions. In consideration of the quality of this essay, it might have been advisable for Miller to have included more essays by aboriginal writers. At least it would have given the book a sense of balance between Indian and white authors.

Another enlightening and immensely informative chapter is

Donald Purich's "The Future of Native Rights." In an insightful and coherent manner, Purich discusses the dominant topic in Canadian politics today—aboriginal rights and the constitution—bringing light to this much publicized and confused topic. His essay is clearly and intelligibly written, without the legal jargon of Purich's profession. With the federal government and the aboriginal people currently locked in a struggle over the concept of *self-government*, Purich makes a considerable contribution by suggesting an alternative, third type of government, somewhere between band council administration and nationhood. His self-determination model "would be something close to provincehood, in which native governments in certain areas would be subject to the Federal government, but would have autonomy in other areas, such as education, economic policies, justice . . . ."

Les Upton's chapter on "The Extermination of the Beothucks of Newfoundland" makes a seemingly determined attempt at justification of inhumane behavior. It is a well-known fact that the British practiced acts of carnage and genocide against the Beothuck Indians. The British fishermen and mariners who slaughtered these Indians looked upon the events as sporting expeditions (J. Frideres, *Native People in Canada*, 1988, p. 21). When the victims fled their villages, the British shot them as sport and torched their homes. Other scholars claim that many Beothucks were captured and sold as slaves (R. Naylor, *Canada in the European Age*, 1987, p. 27). The reason they suffered such a hideous fate was that they were not needed as laborers in the fishing or fur industries. Hence, they were of no value to the British. Historians who claim that Beothuck Indians were killed by Micmac Indians or died from diseases are seeking a rationalization.

Some authors in *Sweet Promises* seem misinformed on the history of Indians in Canada. In his essay, John Tobias writes that protection, civilization, and assimilation "have always been the goals of Canada's Indian policy." This statement lacks credibility, not only historically but in almost every dimension of existence. Almost all historical knowledge contradicts such a claim. For example, Frideres states that "[t]he British granted themselves charters and land in Canada with total disregard to the fact that they were inhabited by thousands of Indians . . . . They did this in an extremely racist fashion . . . . Charles I . . . authorized the state to . . . collect troops and wage war on the barbarians, and to pursue them . . . and put them to death" (Frideres, p. 212). Dispossessing Indians of almost all their land and resources and making them

prisoners on rural compounds is surely not "protection." Segregating them on isolated reserves cannot qualify as "assimilation." In fact, Canada's reserve system is often considered somewhat parallel to the apartheid policy of South Africa. From 1885 until the 1950s, Indians could not leave their reserves without written passes.

A chapter that raises the question of documentation and primary sources is John Taylor's "Canada's North-West Indian Policy in the 1870's." In this short article, which stemmed from the writer's doctoral dissertation, Taylor discusses the problem of resource material during the treaty-making period, complaining about the lack of primary sources in researching treaty negotiations. Without a clear link, he refers to George Stanley's *Birth of Western Canada* and claims that it "remains the most thoroughly researched and most detailed account of the subject in print." In reviewing Stanley's resources, I noted that he used largely primary documents from the Hudson's Bay Company. Even in his discussion of the so-called Riel Rebellions, he used the same sources, plus those from the archives of the missionaries. In the writing of aboriginal history, the use of primary documents is a problem, because these documents were composed by oppressors of Indians and Métis. They are not only biased and distorted, but often falsified. The documents of the colonizers are as racist as their historical interpretations. Therefore, it is not surprising that Taylor's interpretation is highly Eurocentric. Evidence does not support his claim that Indians were anxious to negotiate and sign treaties. Information from aboriginal sources suggests that treaties were signed as a result of manipulation, coercion, and trickery by government officials. No treaties were signed in the province of British Columbia. If the Indians had wanted treaties, surely the government would have obliged the Indians of British Columbia.

Treaties served to dispossess Indians of their lands and resources. The terms are specific: "Indians . . . do hereby cede, release, surrender and yield up to the Government of Canada, forever, all their rights, titles and privileges whatsoever to the lands included within . . ." (T. C. Douglas, *The Treaties*, 1961, p. 16). In Treaty 3, the Saluteaux were dispossessed of fifty-five thousand square miles of land. In return, they were given a few hundred acres and an annuity of five dollars per year, which remains the same today. Taylor's essay provides misleading information to an ignorant white population.

In summary, this book lacks organization in terms of particular

historical categories, issues, or periods. The selections appear hurried and random. It might have been better to include fewer classifications and fewer essays, with greater depth and length. In addition, all the essays were published previously and therefore are available elsewhere to researchers.

The title of the book should have been *A Reader on Indian/White Relations in Canada from a Eurocentric Perspective*. One of the major critical concerns of historiographers is Eurocentrism and the authenticity of the history of aboriginal civilizations. Unfortunately, Miller failed to recognize this crucial issue. I hope future texts on Indian/white relations will be sensitive to Eurocentrism and will provide a better balance of essays with an aboriginal perspective.

*Howard Adams*

University of California, Davis (emeritus)