

# The First Nations of the Northwest

- How were the First Nations affected by the Canadian government's policies in the Northwest? Do you think people at that time would have seen the government as dishonest?

## *DID YOU KNOW...*

The NWMP later became the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), known today as the national police force of Canada. The RCMP is responsible for enforcing federal laws, policing some jurisdictions, providing counterterrorism security, and protecting the prime minister, the monarch, and the governor general.

### **North West Mounted Police (NWMP)**

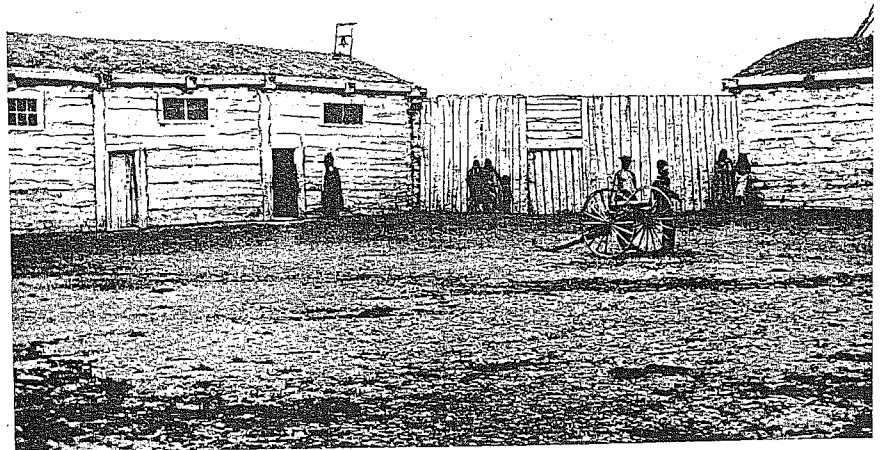
Canada's national police force, now called the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)

**paramilitary** a force that operates like the army but is not part of it

## The North West Mounted Police

Even though Manitoba and the North-West Territories had come under Canadian control in 1869, it took time before Ottawa's authority could be fully enforced throughout such a vast region. One of the first problems facing the government was the arrival of American fur traders. The American fur trade consisted of a number of small companies that traded strong, cheap liquor called "firewater" to First Nations trappers in exchange for furs. Although this trade was outlawed, it was very successful. The centre of the whisky trade was Fort Whoop-Up, near what is now Lethbridge, Alberta. The whisky trade devastated local Blackfoot communities, leading to widespread alcoholism, malnutrition, disease, and death.

The Canadian government was worried that the presence of the American whisky traders might lead to the loss of territory to the Americans. In 1873, the government created the **North West Mounted Police (NWMP)**. This group acted as a police force and a **paramilitary** organization for the Northwest, enforcing the law and establishing a Canadian presence in the region. Later that same year, an incident in Cypress Hills accelerated the arrival of the NWMP in the region.



**FIGURE 5-7** Fort Whoop-Up, 1874. This fort was one of many where whisky was traded for furs. How were traders in this area able to engage in illegal trade for so long?

## The Cypress Hills Massacre

In June of 1873, a group of Nakoda camping in Cypress Hills was attacked by a party of American “wolfers,” trappers who put out poisoned bison meat to kill wolves and coyotes. More than 20 Nakoda were killed, and the incident came to be known as the Cypress Hills Massacre. Outrage erupted in eastern Canada, where people saw the attack as a threat to Canadian sovereignty in the West. In response, the government sent a force of 275 NWMP to the Prairies to take control.

By the time the NWMP reached Fort Whoop-Up, they discovered that the whisky traders had fled. Hoping for stability and peace, many First Nations people thought that the presence of the NWMP would put an end to the lawlessness that had plagued the region.

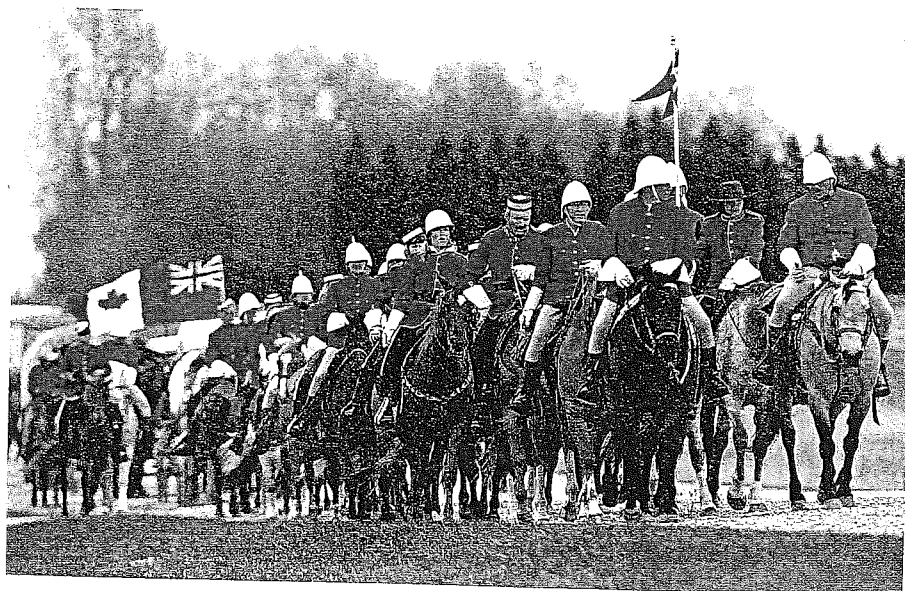
*If the police had not come to the country, where would we all be now? Bad men and whisky were killing us so fast that very few of us would have been left today.*

—Crowfoot, a chief of the Blackfoot

## The Treaty Process

The Canadian government was determined to open the Prairies to European and Canadian settlers. However, this was not possible until the question of First Nations title to the land had been settled. In 1870, all land in Manitoba and the North-West Territories was still held by First Nations. The exception was land in the Selkirk Settlement, leased by Selkirk in an 1817 treaty with the Saulteaux and Cree.

The government was determined to gain control of land as quickly and as cheaply as possible. First Nations leaders, recognizing that they would have to share some land, wanted to make the best possible deal to secure the future of their people.



**FIGURE 5-8** RCMP officers re-enact the NWMP march west in 1999. The NWMP resembled a British military cavalry unit, complete with red uniforms. What impression do you think these uniforms would have made?

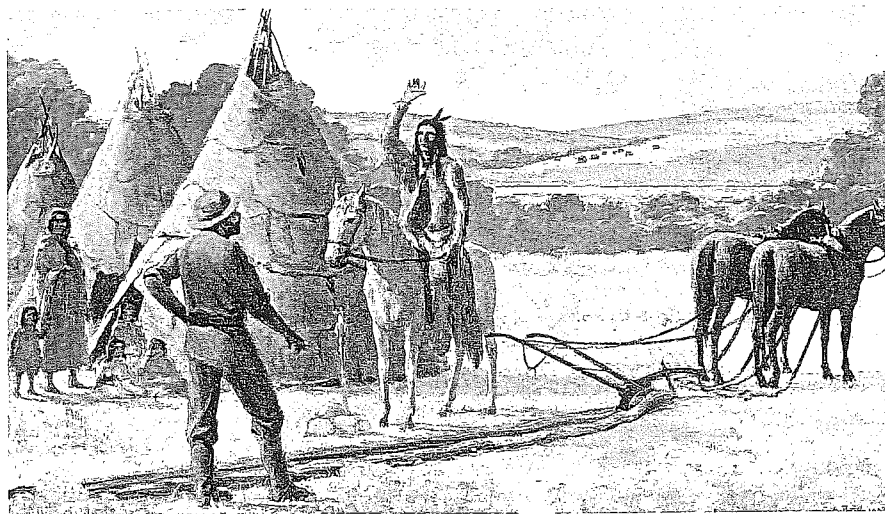
### *DID YOU KNOW...*

The NWMP marching west were accompanied by 114 Red River carts with Métis drivers, 310 horses, 142 oxen, and 93 beef cattle. They were guided by Jerry Potts, a Métis.

### *DID YOU KNOW...*

During the treaty process, the Métis were asked to identify themselves as “white” or “First Nations”; they were not seen as a distinct people with land rights of their own.

**FIGURE 5-9** This painting is called *The Treaty Line*. It was not intended to be a realistic depiction of an actual event, but it is symbolic. What does the painting symbolize? What does it show about the point of view of the artist?



First Nations had a long-standing tradition of negotiating agreement. They were accustomed to give and take, which formed a key element in successful negotiation. First Nations also tended to bargain in good faith; people stood by their word and meant what they said. When negotiating treaties with the Canadian government, they believed they were making an exchange—sharing their land for the protection and support of their people.

In 1871, the Canadian government began the treaty process with the First Nations of the Prairies. Indian Commissioner Wemyss Simpson was sent to Manitoba to begin talks with the Cree and Anishinabé. Read the two quotations below. What points of view do they express? Do you think these views would have led to successful negotiations?

*God intends this land to raise great crops for all his children, and the time is come when it is to be used for that purpose. White people will come here to cultivate it under any circumstances. No power on Earth can prevent it.*

—Wemyss Simpson, 1871

*I have turned this matter of a treaty over in my mind and I cannot see anything in it to benefit my children. This is what frightens me. After I showed you what I meant to keep for a reserve, you continued to make it smaller and smaller... Let the Queen's subjects go on my land if they choose. I give them liberty. Let them rob me. I will go home...*

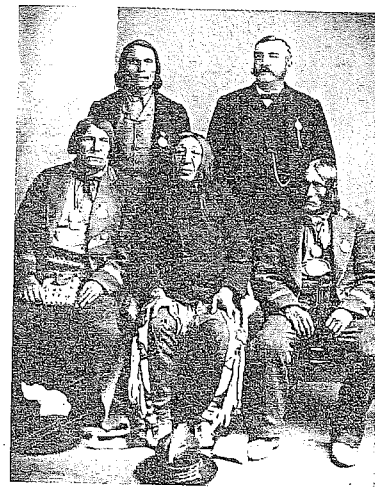
—Ay-ee-ta-pe-tung, 1871

Henry Prince, chief of the Anishinabé, asked how the government intended to assist the First Nations if they agreed to end their traditional way of life and settle on reserves.

*How are we to be treated? It is said the Queen wishes Indians to cultivate the ground. They cannot scratch it—work it with their fingers. What assistance will they get if they settle down?*

—Henry Prince, 1871

The Cree and Anishinabé did not want to give up all of their land. They wanted to retain control of about 60 percent of the province of Manitoba. However, Simpson had instructions to offer only 160 acres (64.7 hectares), the standard homesteader's quarter-section, for every family of five. While this offer was not acceptable to the Cree and Anishinabé, they knew that no other offer would be made. Still, they managed to include some conditions: the government eventually agreed to supply farm equipment, supplies, and instruction in farming techniques. By the end of August 1871, Treaties 1 and 2, covering the southern part of Manitoba, had been signed.



**FIGURE 5-10** Mistawasis (front row, right) and Ahtahkakoop (front row, left), negotiators for Treaty No. 6. Why did these leaders insist on receiving start-up assistance for their people?

## Zoom In Treaty No. 6

Treaty No. 6 was a historic agreement between the Cree and the government. As you read, consider what each side gained and lost as a result of the agreement.

In the summer of 1876, Alexander Morris, the Lieutenant-Governor of the North-West Territories, travelled to Fort Carlton to settle a treaty with the Cree who lived in the area. The Cree insisted on using their own interpreter, Métis Peter Erasmus, when they discovered that the interpreters provided by the government did not speak their language. Initial negotiations lasted almost 10 days, longer than had been anticipated. Cree leaders discussed at length the proposed treaty terms and drew up amendments that they felt had to be accepted.

Mistawasis and Ahtahkakoop, two senior Cree leaders, both knew that eventually they would have to agree to a treaty. They felt they had little choice in the matter, since the destruction of the bison meant that many Cree were already starving, and the government promised food if the treaties were signed. Nevertheless, they wanted guarantees that assistance would be provided if their people began the task of farming on their reserves.

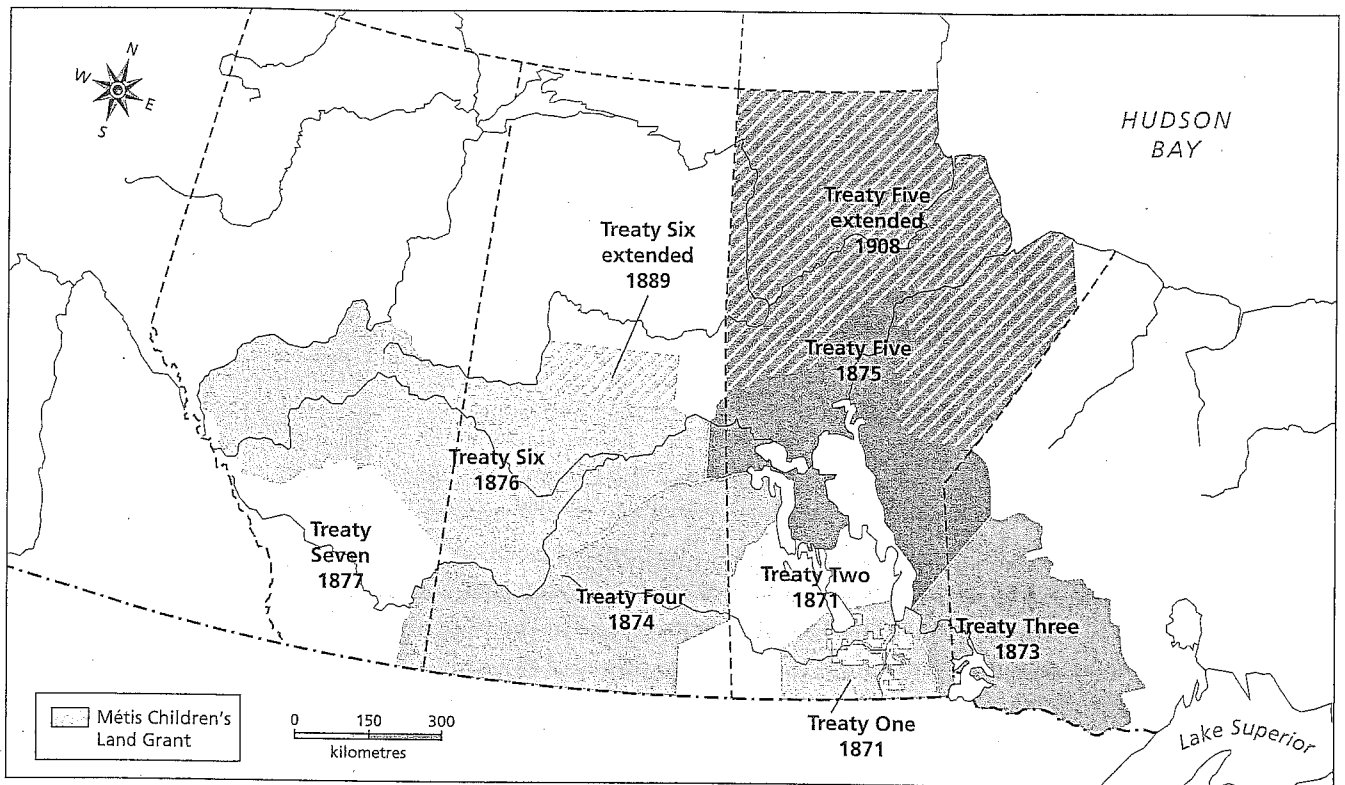
Younger leaders, like Poundmaker, argued against the

treaty. Mistawasis could only ask, "Have you anything better to offer our people?"

In the end, the senior leaders had a clause added to the treaty, which they felt provided the guarantees they were seeking: direct assistance for three years in the form of farming tools, supplies, and instruction. Morris seemed to think that the Cree wanted ongoing assistance, but Mistawasis and Ahtahkakoop were emphatic that their desire was to eventually become self-sufficient.

*Can we stop the power of the white man from spreading over the land like the grasshoppers that cloud the sky and then fall to consume every blade of grass and every leaf on the trees in their path? I think not. Before this happens let us ponder carefully our choice of roads.*

—Plains Cree Chief Ahtahkakoop



**FIGURE 5-11** Treaties signed in the 1870s (including later extensions). Reserves were created throughout the treaty areas, while the Métis children's land grants were the only lands officially allotted to the Métis. Why was the Canadian government not yet concerned about territory farther north?

### ***DID YOU KNOW...***

Treaties continue to be signed in Canada today. Most reinforce or clarify the rights of Aboriginal peoples in a province or territory. In later chapters, you will read more about modern treaties such as the Nisga'a Treaty.

## **Treaty Rights**

Under the terms of the numbered treaties, and those that followed in other regions of Canada, Aboriginal peoples agreed to share their land in exchange for specific rights. These rights included access to resources, health care, and education. Many Aboriginal rights—such as the right to hunt or fish, or to self-government—can be seen as rights Aboriginal peoples have had for time immemorial. Other rights guaranteed under the treaties are part of official, negotiated agreements with the government.

Aboriginal rights in Canada are protected under the Canadian Constitution. However, there have been challenges to these rights, and many Aboriginal groups have had to fight for recognition of their treaty rights. You will learn more about some of these challenges in later chapters of *Horizons*.

## **First Nations Farming**

By the end of the 1870s, seven treaties were in place across the southern Prairies. Many First Nations had already been escorted by the NWMP onto the reserves, and they soon began to farm the land.

As you read in Chapter 2, First Nations such as the Ouendat and the Haudenosaunee were successful farmers on the fertile lands around the Great Lakes. They supplemented their hunting and fishing with crops such

### **WEB LINK**

Read a copy of Treaty No. 6 on the Pearson Web site.



as squash, corn, and beans. However, farming on the Prairies could be a challenge. Many farmers, both European and First Nations, struggled with poor crops, insects, and drought.

Even though he had objected to Treaty No. 6, Poundmaker also tried farming. One year, his crops died in a drought. Another year, he harvested a bumper crop, only to find that the Canadian government would not provide the mill needed to grind the wheat into flour. Poundmaker and other leaders soon realized that their people were no further from the brink of starvation than they had been before.

## Was Failure Unavoidable?

The main problem for the First Nations farmers of the Prairies was that the tools, supplies, animals, and instruction guaranteed by the treaties proved inadequate, when they appeared at all. The plows were poorly made and were useless for prairie soils. Furthermore, the oxen that were provided could not pull plows. The seed was sent too late in the year, and First Nations farmers were forbidden to use steam-powered **threshing** machines after the harvest.

It seemed as if the Canadian government and its officials wanted the farms to fail, even while telling First Nations that they should become farmers. The attitude of Indian Commissioner Hayter Reed in the 1880s can be seen as an illustration of the government's view. Reed believed that it was "unnatural" for First Nations to use machinery—although it is impossible to grow and harvest sustainable amounts of wheat without it. Nor did Reed want First Nations farmers to sell surplus wheat. According to Reed, if they grew more than what was necessary for their own needs, they were planting too much. In the face of such attitudes, and in spite of their best efforts, by 1900 almost all First Nations living on prairie reserves had abandoned farming.

**threshing** the process of separating grain from stalks or husks; the steam-powered threshing machine saved time and labour



**FIGURE 5-12** Blackfoot men sow by hand on their farm south of Calgary. What does this image tell you about the needs of First Nations farmers? How did the policies of the Canadian government lead to the failure of First Nations farms?

**Indian Act** an act created to regulate the lives of the First Nations of Canada

**paternalistic** an attitude based on a family hierarchy—the “father” makes decisions on behalf of the “children”

**ward** a minor under the care of a guardian; in this case, the government is the guardian

**WEB LINK** .....

For more information about the Indian Act, visit the Pearson Web site.

***DID YOU KNOW...***

The potlatch, an important giving ceremony for First Nations of the west coast, was illegal in Canada until 1951.

## The Indian Act

The Canadian government introduced the **Indian Act** in 1876. This act formalized the assimilation of First Nations, providing government administration of reserves and treaty rights across the Dominion. The Act changed through time, with new regulations being applied as Canada developed. The Indian Act had an enormous impact on the Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

The **paternalistic** attitude of the government, which you explored in Chapter 3, continued. In this case, the government made decisions on behalf of Aboriginal peoples. Most decisions, as seen in the case of Hayter Reed, were influenced either by prejudice or misunderstanding. The Indian Act ruled that

- First Nations were wards of the government, living only on reserves.
- First Nations were required to register with the government; if they did not, they were considered “non-status” and would lose their rights.
- Special passes were required to come and go from reserves. For some time, Europeans were not allowed on the reserves, which created a feeling of distrust between First Nations and their neighbours.
- First Nations children had to attend residential schools. As you have seen, the aim of residential schools was to assimilate First Nations people.
- Traditional ways of self-governance, such as choosing leaders, were also denied, as were important ceremonies, such as the sun dance.

Many First Nations felt that the government had failed them. Poverty, isolation, and the loss of their rights and freedoms caused profound discontent. Was the outcome of this discontent unavoidable? Find out more as you read this chapter.

## ACTIVITIES

1. How did the creation of the NWMP impact Canada? Identify and support two or three possible consequences.
2. Why did the Canadian government want treaties to be signed? Explain how the government's attitude had an impact on the agreements.
3. Some people believe the Canadian government demonstrated bad faith in terms of treaty agreements. Others believe their actions were necessary in building a nation. What do you think? Use specific examples to support your answer.
4. Discuss the Indian Act with your class.
  - a) Did the government have the right to make decisions for Aboriginal peoples?
  - b) What effect would the Indian Act have on the identity of First Nations in Canada?
  - c) In what ways would the Act have been different if First Nations had been consulted?

