

# Victorian Times and Aboriginal Peoples

## ► How would immigration and government policies at this time affect the Aboriginal peoples of British North America?

Immigration had an enormous impact on Aboriginal peoples. Pushed aside to make room for colonial settlement, First Nations in the **Canadas** were forced to live on **reserves**, land that was only a fraction of their former traditional territories. They suffered greatly from disease, poverty, and other social problems. Aboriginal culture, which was based on a close relationship with the land, was hard to preserve under such conditions. Adapting to European ways often became a matter of survival.

For some Aboriginal communities, traditional ways of life were based on hunting and fishing instead of agriculture, and they lived in small family groups. The government usually tried to force them to settle and farm, a severe change in lifestyle that many resisted. Others, such as the Mohawks along the Grand River, were more successful in dealing with the government. They lived in larger communities, had farmed for centuries, and had a long-standing, internal government. They also had a long history of negotiating with colonial officials, merchants, and land speculators. However, this relationship changed as time and the pressures of colonial development continued.

Many Aboriginal leaders came to realize they were no longer being treated as allies by the colonial governments. A leader of the Anishinabé wrote this letter to the governor:

*...you have become a great people, whilst we have melted away like snow beneath an April sun; our strength is wasted, our countless warriors dead, our forests laid low; you have hounded us from every place as with a wand, you have swept away all our pleasant land, and like some giant foe you tell us "willing or unwilling, you must now go from amid these rocks and wastes..."*

—Little Pine, 1849



**FIGURE 3-14** This studio portrait from about 1850 shows Maungua-daus, also known as George Henry, a leader of the Anishinabé. He is posing in a costume he wore during public appearances. What did Henry or the photographer hope to project by showing him in traditional dress, which was no longer worn in everyday life?

**the Canadas** Canada East and Canada West, within the Province of Canada

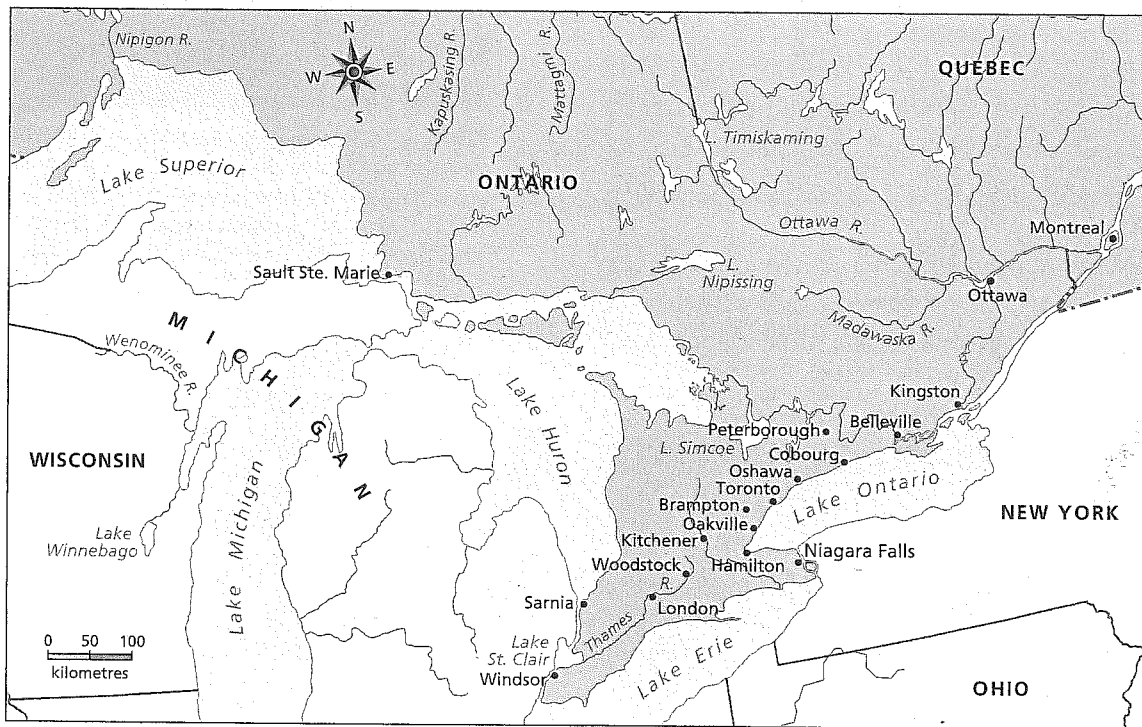
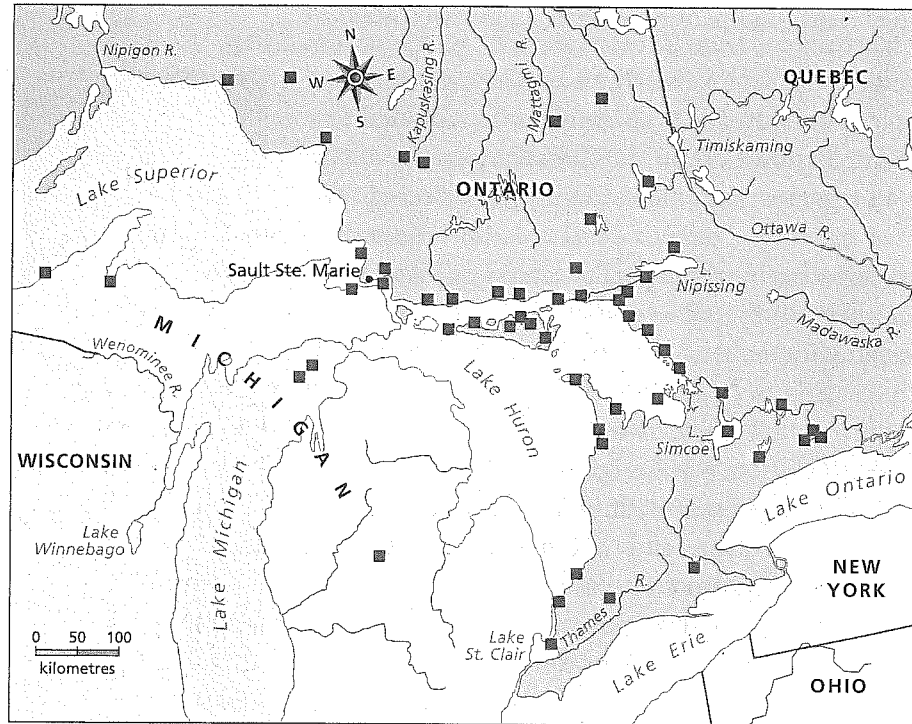
**reserves** land set aside by governments for the use of First Nations

### WEB LINK

For more information about Victorian times and Aboriginal peoples, visit the Pearson Web site.

As colonial settlement moved into Aboriginal territories, land buyers pressured the government to sell them the best land. Sometimes, immigrants and local governments challenged the terms of established treaties, forcing Aboriginal leaders to defend what had already been agreed to.

**FIGURE 3-15** These two maps show settlement patterns. The first shows Anishinabé reserves in the mid-1800s, where the Anishinabé were sent to live by the government. The second map shows the location of towns and cities at that time. What conclusions can you draw by comparing these two maps?



The government often persuaded **bands** to rent out good farmland on reserves, and then would sell the rights to immigrants. Since some bands were struggling financially, taking the money seemed to be one of the few options available to them. As a result, large sections of territory guaranteed by treaty were lost, often permanently.

In 1857, the government of the Province of Canada passed the Gradual Civilization Act, which was meant to **assimilate** Aboriginal peoples by making them citizens of Britain. If they were citizens of Britain, they would have none of the treaty rights or protected status of First Nations, and the government would be able to ignore agreements made in the past. **Enfranchisement** within the British Empire was presented by the government as a privilege, but for Aboriginal peoples this was just another way to make them more like Europeans. This legislation was the beginning of what would become the Indian Act, which was passed in 1876.

Interactions between the government of the time and Aboriginal peoples were coloured by the general feeling among the Victorians that Aboriginal peoples were uncivilized and childlike—so-called noble savages. Today, this attitude is considered condescending and insulting, but to the British Empire, Aboriginal peoples were “wild children.” This attitude influenced both popular culture and government legislation, as you will read in the following pages and in later chapters of *Horizons*.

In spite of tremendous pressure to change and assimilate into European society, Aboriginal culture was not entirely lost. **Elders** kept alive many traditions and oral histories that continue to this day.

**band** an Aboriginal community recognized by the government as an administrative unit

**assimilate** to join another culture and to give up one's own language and traditions

**enfranchisement** granting someone the rights and protection of a citizen of a particular country

**Elders** people respected for their wisdom and understanding of traditional knowledge



**FIGURE 3-16** In 2001, outside the Supreme Court of Canada, a protestor listens to speeches at a protest rally for Aboriginal land rights. The process of assimilation of Aboriginal peoples included taking their lands. Are there other examples of assimilation in Canadian history? What is being done about it today?