

Excerpts from the  
Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996)

Part One: The Relationship in Historical Perspective



Works by Aboriginal Canadian artist Norval Morrisseau

## PART ONE The Relationship in Historical Perspective

### 3



### Conceptions of History

OF THE 16 SPECIFIC POINTS in the Commission's terms of reference (see Appendix A), the first was the instruction to investigate and make concrete recommendations on "the history of relations between Aboriginal peoples, the Canadian government and Canadian society as a whole."

Indeed, it is impossible to make sense of the issues that trouble the relationship today without a clear understanding of the past. This is true whether we speak of the nature of Aboriginal self-government in the Canadian federation, the renewal of treaty relationships, the challenge of revitalizing Aboriginal cultural identities, or the sharing of lands and resources. We simply cannot understand the depth of these issues or make sense of the current debate without a solid grasp of the shared history of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on this continent.

In this respect, the past is more than something to be recalled and debated intellectually. It has important contemporary and practical implications, because many of the attitudes, institutions and practices that took shape in the past significantly influence and constrain the present. This is most obvious when it comes to laws such as the *Indian Act*, but it is also evident in many of the assumptions that influence how contemporary institutions such as the educational, social services and justice systems function.

An examination of history also shows how the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians has assumed different shapes at different times in response to changing circumstances. In fact, it is possible to identify different stages in the relationship and to see the different characteristics of each. This allows us to reflect more deeply on the factors that have contributed to a relationship that has been more mutually beneficial and harmonious in some periods than in others. It also permits us to understand how the relationship has come to serve the interests of one party at the expense of the other with the passage of time.

Commissioners have had an unparalleled opportunity to hear from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people all across Canada. All Commissioners — those new to the study of

these issues and those whose professional lives have been devoted to grappling with them — learned a great deal from the experience and were moved by what they learned. One of the clearest messages that emerged is the importance of understanding the historical background to contemporary issues. Commissioners believe it is vital that Canadians appreciate the depth and richness of this history as well as its sometimes tragic elements.

But Commissioners also concluded that most Canadians are simply unaware of the history of the Aboriginal presence in what is now Canada and that there is little understanding of the origins and evolution of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people that have led us to the present moment. Lack of historical awareness has been combined with a lack of understanding on the part of most Canadians of the substantial cultural differences that still exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Together these factors have created fissures in relations between the original inhabitants of North America and generations of newcomers. They impede restoration of the balanced and respectful relationship that is the key to correcting our understanding of our shared past and moving forward together into the future.

## **1. Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Approaches to History**

Rendering accurately the history of a cross-cultural relationship is not simple or straightforward. History is not an exact science. Past events have been recorded and interpreted by human beings who, much like ourselves, have understood them through the filter of their own values, perceptions and general philosophies of life and society. As with all histories, therefore, it is clear that how an event or a series of events is chronicled over time is shaped by the perceptions of the historian. Even among historians of the same period and cultural outlook, substantial differences of interpretation may exist. Consider how much greater such differences in interpretation must be when it comes to perspectives rooted in radically different cultural traditions.

Important differences derive from the methodology of history — how the past is examined, recorded and communicated. The non-Aboriginal historical tradition in Canada is rooted in western scientific methodology and emphasizes scholarly documentation and written records.<sup>1</sup> It seeks objectivity and assumes that persons recording or interpreting events attempt to escape the limitations of their own philosophies, cultures and outlooks.

In the non-Aboriginal tradition, at least until recently, the purpose of historical study has often been the analysis of particular events in an effort to establish what 'really' happened as a matter of objective historical truth or, more modestly, to marshal facts in support of a particular interpretation of past events.

While interpretations may vary with the historian, the goal has been to come up with an account that best describes all the events under study. Moreover, underlying the western humanist intellectual tradition in the writing of history is a focus on human beings as the centrepiece of history, including the notion of the march of progress and the inevitability of societal evolution. This historical tradition is also secular and distinguishes what is

scientific from what is religious or spiritual, on the assumption that these are two different and separable aspects of the human experience.

The Aboriginal tradition in the recording of history is neither linear nor steeped in the same notions of social progress and evolution. Nor is it usually human-centred in the same way as the western scientific tradition, for it does not assume that human beings are anything more than one — and not necessarily the most important — element of the natural order of the universe. Moreover, the Aboriginal historical tradition is an oral one, involving legends, stories and accounts handed down through the generations in oral form. It is less focused on establishing objective truth and assumes that the teller of the story is so much a part of the event being described that it would be arrogant to presume to classify or categorize the event exactly or for all time.

In the Aboriginal tradition the purpose of repeating oral accounts from the past is broader than the role of written history in western societies. It may be to educate the listener, to communicate aspects of culture, to socialize people into a cultural tradition, or to validate the claims of a particular family to authority and prestige.<sup>2</sup> Those who hear the oral accounts draw their own conclusions from what they have heard, and they do so in the particular context (time, place and situation) of the telling. Thus the meaning to be drawn from an oral account depends on who is telling it, the circumstances in which the account is told, and the interpretation the listener gives to what has been heard.

Oral accounts of the past include a good deal of subjective experience. They are not simply a detached recounting of factual events but, rather, are "facts enmeshed in the stories of a lifetime".<sup>3</sup> They are also likely to be rooted in particular locations, making reference to particular families and communities. This contributes to a sense that there are many histories, each characterized in part by how a people see themselves, how they define their identity in relation to their environment, and how they express their uniqueness as a people.

Unlike the western scientific tradition, which creates a sense of distance in time between the listener or reader and the events being described, the tendency of Aboriginal perspectives is to create a sense of immediacy by encouraging listeners to imagine that they are participating in the past event being recounted. Ideas about how the universe was created offer a particularly compelling example of differences in approach to interpreting the past. In the western intellectual tradition, the origin of the world, whether in an act of creation or a cosmic big bang, is something that occurred once and for all in a far distant past remote from the present except in a religious or scientific sense. In Aboriginal historical traditions, the particular creation story of each people, although it finds its origins in the past, also, and more importantly, speaks to the present. It invites listeners to participate in the cycle of creation through their understanding that, as parts of a world that is born, dies and is reborn in the observable cycle of days and seasons, they too are part of a natural order, members of a distinct people who share in that order.

As the example of creation stories has begun to suggest, conceptions of history or visions of the future can be expressed in different ways, which in turn involve different ways of representing time. The first portrays time as an arrow moving from the past into the unknown future; this is a *linear* perspective. The second portrays time as a circle that returns on itself and repeats fundamental aspects of experience. This is a *cyclic* point of view.

As shown in Figure 3.1, from a linear perspective the historical relationship established between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is a matter of the past. However regrettable some aspects of this relationship may have been, it is over and done with. The present relationship grows out of the past, however, and can be improved upon. So we look to the future to establish a *new* relationship, which will be more balanced and equitable.

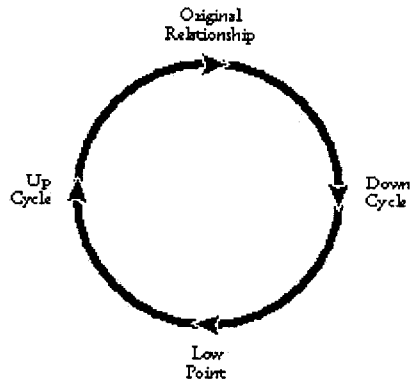
From the second perspective, the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups has moved through a cycle (Figure 3.2). At the high point of the cycle, we find the original relationship established in the early days of contact between Aboriginal peoples and newcomers, especially in the course of the fur trade. Despite some variations, this relationship often featured a rough-and-ready equality and involved a strong element of mutual respect. True, this respect sprang in part from a healthy regard for the military capacities of the other parties and from a pragmatic grasp of the advantages afforded by trade and co-operation. However, it also involved a guarded appreciation of the other's distinctive cultures and a recognition of certain underlying commonalities. From this beginning, there was a slow downturn, as the military strength of the Aboriginal parties gradually waned, as the fur trade dwindled in importance and as non-Aboriginal people increased dramatically in number. Having passed through the low point in the cycle, where adherence to the principles of equality and respect was almost negligible, there is now a slow upswing as efforts are made to *renew* the original relationship and to restore the balance that it represented.

Although it would be wrong to draw hard and fast distinctions in this area, we have found that many Aboriginal people tend to take a cyclic perspective, while the linear approach is more common in the larger Canadian society. Differences of this kind are important, not because they represent absolute distinctions between peoples — cultural worlds are too rich

**FIGURE 3.1**  
**A Linear Perspective on the Historical Relationship**



**FIGURE 3.2**  
**A Cyclic Perspective on the Historical Relationship**



and complex for that — but because they serve to illustrate, however inadequately, that there are different ways of expressing ideas that, at a deeper level, may have much in common.

To summarize, the history of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is represented quite differently in the two cultures. The contrast between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal historical traditions suggests different purposes for revisiting the past, different methodologies and different contents and forms. We have chosen to present an account of past events that recognizes and accepts the legitimacy of the historical perspectives and traditions of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.<sup>4</sup> What follows is our best effort to be true to both historical traditions as well as to lay the groundwork for the rest of our report.

## **2. An Historical Framework**

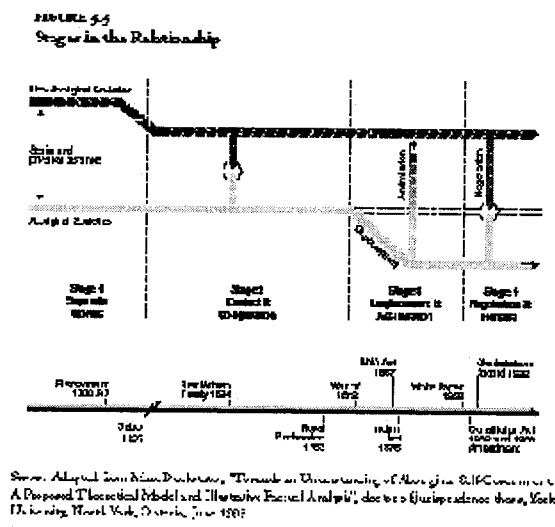
Some of the old people...talk about the water...and it is really nice to hear them talk about the whole cycle of water, where it all starts and where it all ends up.

Chief Albert Saddleman  
Okanagan Band  
Kelowna, British Columbia, 16 June 1993<sup>5</sup>

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have had sustained contact in the part of North America that has become known as Canada for some 500 years, at least in some areas. To summarize and interpret the nature of so complex, fluid and interdependent a relationship ("where it all starts and where it all ends up") is a formidable assignment. This is especially the case when one considers the sheer diversity in the nature of the relationship in different areas of the country, populated by different Aboriginal peoples and settled at different periods by people of diverse non-Aboriginal origins.

In the Atlantic region, for instance, a sustained non-Aboriginal presence among the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet peoples has been a fact for nearly 500 years, but in most parts of the far north, Inuit have been in sustained contact with non-Aboriginal people only in recent times. In Quebec and southern and central Ontario, the relationship is of almost the same duration as that in the Atlantic region, while in northern Ontario and the prairies, sustained contact and the development of formal treaty relationships has occurred only within the last 150 years. In parts of the Pacific coast, the nature of the relationship has yet to be formalized in treaties, even though interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people has taken place for some 200 years.

In approaching the task of summarizing and interpreting the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, the Commission has found it useful to divide its own account of the historical relationship into four stages, as illustrated in Figure 3.3 and as described in the next four chapters. The stages follow each other with some regularity, but they overlap and occur at different times in different regions.



## 2.1 Stage 1: Separate Worlds

In the period before 1500, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies developed in isolation from each other. Differences in physical and social environments inevitably meant differences in culture and forms of social organization. On both sides of the Atlantic, however, national groups with long traditions of governing themselves emerged, organizing themselves into different social and political forms according to their traditions and the needs imposed by their environments.

In this first stage, the two societies — Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal — were physically separated by a wide ocean. From an Aboriginal philosophical perspective, the separation between the two distinct worlds could also be expressed as having been established by the acts of creation. Accordingly, the Creator gave each people its distinct place and role

to perform in the harmonious operation of nature and in a manner and under circumstances appropriate to each people. Aboriginal creation stories are thus not only the repository of a people's distinct national history, but also an expression of the divine gift and caretaking responsibility given to each people by the Creator.

By the end of Stage 1 (see Chapter 4), the physical and cultural distance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies narrowed drastically as Europeans moved across the ocean and began to settle in North America.

## **2.2 Stage 2: Contact and Co-operation**

The beginning of Stage 2 (see Chapter 5) was marked by increasingly regular contact between European and Aboriginal societies and by the need to establish the terms by which they would live together. It was a period when Aboriginal people provided assistance to the newcomers to help them survive in the unfamiliar environment; this stage also saw the establishment of trading and military alliances, as well as intermarriage and mutual cultural adaptation. This stage was also marked by incidents of conflict, by growth in the number of non-Aboriginal immigrants, and by the steep decline in Aboriginal populations following the ravages of diseases to which they had no natural immunity.

Although there were exceptions, there were many instances of mutual tolerance and respect during this long period. In these cases, social distance was maintained — that is, the social, cultural and political differences between the two societies were respected by and large. Each was regarded as distinct and autonomous, left to govern its own internal affairs but co-operating in areas of mutual interest and, occasionally and increasingly, linked in various trading relationships and other forms of nation-to-nation alliances.

## **2.3 Stage 3: Displacement and Assimilation**

In Stage 3 (see Chapter 6), non-Aboriginal society was for the most part no longer willing to respect the distinctiveness of Aboriginal societies. Non-Aboriginal society made repeated attempts to recast Aboriginal people and their distinct forms of social organization so they would conform to the expectations of what had become the mainstream. In this period, interventions in Aboriginal societies reached their peak, taking the form of relocations, residential schools, the outlawing of Aboriginal cultural practices, and various other interventionist measures of the type found in the Indian Acts of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

These interventions did not succeed in undermining Aboriginal social values or their sense of distinctiveness, however. Neither did they change the determination of Aboriginal societies to conduct their relations with the dominant society in the manner Aboriginal people considered desirable and appropriate, in line with the parameters established in the initial contact period. (Hence the continuation of the horizontal line in dotted form in Figure 3.3.)



Non-Aboriginal society began to recognize the failure of these policies toward the end of this period, particularly after the federal government's ill-fated 1969 white paper, which would have ended the special constitutional, legal and political status of Aboriginal peoples within Confederation.

## **2.4 Stage 4: Negotiation and Renewal**

This stage in the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies, which takes us to the present day, is characterized by non-Aboriginal society's admission of the manifest failure of its interventionist and assimilationist approach. This acknowledgement is pushed by domestic and also by international forces. Campaigns by national Aboriginal social and political organizations, court decisions on Aboriginal rights, sympathetic public opinion, developments in international law, and the worldwide political mobilization of Indigenous peoples under the auspices of the United Nations have all played a role during this stage in the relationship.

As a result, non-Aboriginal society is haltingly beginning the search for change in the relationship. A period of dialogue, consultation and negotiation ensues, in which a range of options, centring on the concept of full Aboriginal self-government and restoration of the original partnership of the contact and co-operation period, is considered. From the perspective of Aboriginal groups, the primary objective is to gain more control over their own affairs by reducing unilateral interventions by non-Aboriginal society and regaining a relationship of mutual recognition and respect for differences. However, Aboriginal people also appear to realize that, at the same time, they must take steps to re-establish their own societies and to heal wounds caused by the many years of dominance by non-Aboriginal people.

It is clear that any attempt to reduce so long and complex a history of interrelationship into four stages is necessarily a simplification of reality. It is as though we have taken many different river systems, each in a different part of the country, each viewed from many different vantages, and tried to channel them into one stream of characteristics that would be most typical of the river as it has flowed through Canada.

We have attempted to retain a sense of the diversity of the historical experience by presenting numerous snapshots or slices of history. Instead of providing a linear, chronological overview, we have chosen particular societies, particular events or particular turning points in history to illustrate each of the stages and to give the flavour of the historical experience in at least some of its complexity.

It is difficult to place each stage within a precise timeframe. In part this is because of the considerable overlap between the stages. They flow easily and almost indiscernibly into each other, with the transition from one to the other becoming apparent only after the next stage is fully under way. Nor is the time frame for each period the same in all parts of the country; Aboriginal groups in eastern and central Canada generally experienced contact with non-Aboriginal societies earlier than groups in more northern or western locations.

Although reasonable people may legitimately differ on the exact point at which one stage ends and another begins, for descriptive purposes we have chosen the following dates on the basis of important demographic, policy, legislative and other markers that help divide the stages from each other. We would therefore end Stage 1 at around the year 1500, because sustained contact between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples took place shortly after that date, at least in the east. The period of contact and co-operation comes to a conclusion in the Maritimes by the 1780s, in Ontario by 1830 and British Columbia by 1870.

We suggest that the period of displacement and assimilation, the third stage, was concluded by the federal government's 1969 white paper. The reaction it provoked and the influence of certain court decisions shortly thereafter clearly marked the beginning of the negotiation and renewal phase.

What follows is an elaboration of events, experiences and perceptions that characterize each of the four stages of the relationship and that form the backdrop to our present situation.

## Notes:

1 We use the term western to refer to the traditions of Europe and societies of European origin.

2 Julie Cruikshank, "Oral Tradition and Oral History: Reviewing Some Issues", *The Canadian Historical Review* LXXV/3 (1994), pp. 403-418.

3 Cruikshank, p. 408.

4 Oral history, linguistic analysis, documentary records and archaeological sources for the study of Aboriginal history are now regarded as complementary, with one source filling gaps in another source and thereby providing a more complete picture.\*\*

Ethnography, which gathers information about culture from living informants, and history, which has usually relied on written sources, have come together to generate the subdiscipline of ethnohistory.

The technique of 'upstreaming', used in ethnohistory, takes accounts from living informants and applies them in interpreting historical records. For example, a secretary at a treaty council might have recorded that "the three bare words of requickening" were performed at the beginning of the meeting. From ethnographic accounts we know that this is part of an Iroquois ceremonial sequence that affirms certain roles and responsibilities between the two sides participating in the ritual. We therefore have a