

The Dispossession of the Mississauga Indians: a Missing Chapter in the Early History of Upper Canada

by Donald B. Smith

Two centuries ago the Mississauga Indians alone controlled what is now the richest industrial area of Canada, the "Golden Horseshoe", but today they no longer occupy any land along the shoreline of Lake Ontario. The Mississauga have been displaced to small reserves at New Credit (near Hagersville), Scugog (near Port Perry), Hiawatha and Alderville (on Rice Lake), and Curve Lake (immediately north of Peterborough). From Kingston to St. Catharines five million newcomers live in their old hunting and fishing grounds. How did the Mississauga initially lose their mastery over the north shore of Lake Ontario? To describe and to explain their dispossession in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (to 1805) is the subject of this paper.

In 1763 the British Government, then involved in suppressing Pontiac's Rebellion, officially recognized the Great Lakes Indians' title to their lands. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 became the Magna Carta of Indian rights in British North America. It immediately ended the old system of unregulated land surrenders — before any further settlement could legally proceed Indian land must first be surrendered by the Indians to the Crown. Twenty years later, however, the former Thirteen Colonies renounced the Proclamation.¹ In the mid-1780s the new Republic argued that she had defeated Britain and her native allies, and that therefore, by the Treaty of Paris of 1783, she had gained political sovereignty as well as absolute ownership over all of the "conquered" Indian territory south of the Great Lakes and east of the Mississippi.² In contrast, Britain continued to apply the Royal Proclamation on the lands remaining to her north of the Great Lakes. Britain was anxious to keep her Indian alliances intact in the event of another North American war.³

The Americans' attempt to enforce their "Conquest Theory" led to another decade of border warfare throughout their new Northwest Territory, as land-hungry settlers continued to migrate down rivers and through mountain passes into the Ohio country. The Shawnee, Delaware, Miami, and Wyandots fought back against the invaders. It is estimated that 1500 Kentuckians lost their lives in the seven-year period from 1783 to 1790, and these losses were but the prologue for the Americans' greatest single tragedy. In early November 1791 the Indians defeated General St. Clair, the Governor of the Northwestern Territory. The American force suffered over 900 casualties.⁴ Only "Mad Anthony" Wayne's decisive victory at Fallen Timbers on August 20, 1794, established American control in the Ohio country.

Canadian historians have noted with considerable satisfaction that Britain escaped similar Indian violence north of the Great Lakes. As Gerald Craig, the author of the well-respected *Upper Canada: The Formative Years*, has written: