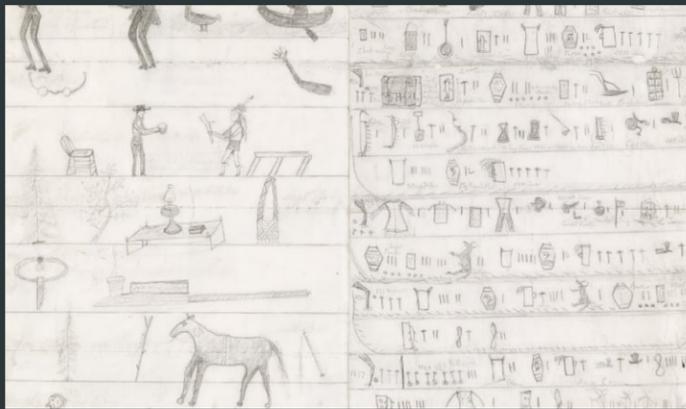


the numbered treaties

The numbered treaties is a collection of eleven treaties between the Crown and Indigenous peoples of Canada. Comprised of oral and written components, traditional Indigenous land was exchanged for rights to treaty lands, cash payments, emergency aid, supplies for farming and tools for hunting and fishing. Created between 1871 and 1921, each treaty is unique and from the Indigenous perspective covers the area between the Lake of the Woods, the Rocky Mountains and the Beaufort Sea. And in colonial mapping terms the numbered treaties include the areas between northern Ontario, southern Manitoba, northeastern British Columbia, interior Plains of Alberta, north of the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. However, the basis of this important agreement between the settler and Indigenous populations of Canada was due to a proclamation produced more than a hundred years before.



Treaty 4 pictograph by Chief Paskwa

The pictograph was drafted by Chief Paskwa in 1883, nine years after the signing of the treaty in 1874. It is the only document depicting Treaty 4 negotiations from an Indigenous perspective. The left side of the pictograph depicts the interpretation of the negotiations from the perspective of the Pasqua First Nation. The right side shows the supplies promised in the treaty, such as agriculture tools and the outfits promised to the chief and headmen.

Created by King George III of England, The Royal Proclamation of 1763 “states explicitly that Aboriginal people reserved all lands not ceded by or purchased from them”. With Canada’s promise to honour the provisions of the proclamation, the “constitutional basis for future negotiations” between the Crown and Indigenous with regards to land was established area.



Kent Monkman, The Subjugation of Truth, 2016

Subjugation of Truth shows Poundmaker and Big Bear sitting dejectedly before a table at which white men are signing away the chiefs' freedom.

Though the eleventh numbered treaty was signed almost one hundred years ago, the numbered treaties still remain a point of contention and source of debate today. The numbered treaties are key in the formation of the modern Canadian landscape as they theoretically outline the mutual responsibilities and rights of the Crown and the Indigenous peoples of Canada. However, since the treaties were created by two immensely different cultural groups with contrasting worldviews, both parties' perspectives differ in regard to the purpose, conditions, terms, meaning and duration of the numbered treaties. Despite the existence of two differing perspectives, Canadians' perception of the numbered treaties is commonly based on the Eurocentric perspective as the Indigenous perspective and oral histories have been ignored or disregarded. Since the numbered treaties continue to impact various facets of life within Indigenous communities, it is essential to re-evaluate and further discuss this issue.

By simply granting them privileges, the Crown believed that the Indigenous peoples of Canada had surrendered their rights and that they could use the treaties as a tool of control and assimilation.

Therefore, by critically discussing the motivating factors, perception and subsequent impact of the numbered treaties for both groups, a better understanding of the topic and why it is still a source of debate today can be achieved.

To adequately understand the Crown's perception of the numbered treaties and the subsequent results, the reasons why the treaties were initially developed must be understood. Until the end of the 18th century the settlement of Canada was not a priority nor a necessity. Simply, trade was the priority and the resources necessary to encourage or support settlement was allocated elsewhere. However, during and after the American Revolution tens of thousands of Loyalists migrated to Canada. This was the beginning of a sporadic pattern of migration that would alter Canada's priorities and significantly influence the future politics and culture of Canada. Though Canada's population continued to grow over the next hundred years, it wasn't until the mid-eighteenth century when events such as the Irish potato famine drastically increased immigration. To match Canada's rapidly growing population, land, resources and infrastructure were needed. Specifically, it became essential to encourage settlement westward, establish farmers and create a railroad to connect Canada's widely spread population. But without the funds to exterminate the Indigenous peoples of Canada, the Crown couldn't afford anything but peace. Therefore, to attain land and resources, peaceful relations had to be secured with treaties.

In general, the Crown viewed the numbered treaties with Indigenous peoples not as “sacred pacts between independent nations” but as binding and final contracts to easily attain land and resources for little in exchange. Specifically, “non-Indigenous treaty negotiators believed treaties were inexpensive and convenient ways to strip Aboriginal title (i.e., ownership) from most of the lands in Canada so that resources could be used by settlers”. By simply granting them privileges, the Crown believed that the Indigenous peoples of Canada had surrendered their rights and that they could use the treaties as a tool of control and assimilation. Overall, the Crown believed that the numbered treaties were a convenient way to secure Canada's future and establish their authority.

In the end the crown gained the land and resources needed for the further settlement and development of Canada. However, the Crown also gained power that allowed them to control the Indigenous population of Canada. Through the numbered treaties, the Crown had isolated Indigenous communities in a more controlled setting and gained control of their food supply, medical care, settlement and education. To further ensure their supremacy, the North-West Mounted Police was formed to establish/enforce the Crown's power and handle the day-to-day administration of “Indian affairs”. As a result, the creation and implementation of the numbered treaties ushered in a new era of change and forged a new relationship between the Crown and the Indigenous peoples of Canada.

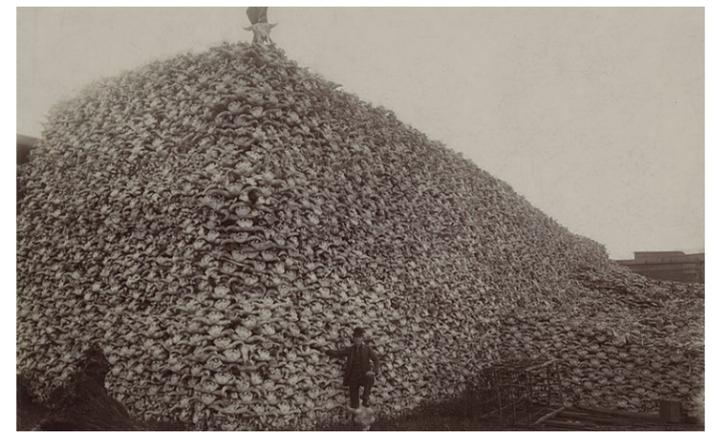
Unlike the Crown, the Indigenous peoples of Canada were motivated to sign the treaties in order to survive in a rapidly changing environment. Throughout history, the bison was a crucial aspect of Indigenous life and were used as their main food source. Despite the importance of the bison to the Indigenous way of life, Europeans commercialized bison products and nearly hunted them to extinction using powerful rifles. Specifically, the bison hide was used to supply the tanning industry in Europe and bison tongues to satiate the European palate. Once “the most abundant large mammal on the continent”, by the end of the nineteenth century, the number of wild bison had dropped to the low hundreds. The loss of this vital food source led to malnutrition and thus comprised immune systems among the Indigenous peoples.

Malnourished and susceptible to various deadly diseases such as smallpox and tuberculosis, their ability to hunt was in turn compromised. This vicious cycle of famine and disease resulted in a drastic decrease in the Indigenous population. Left vulnerable by the destruction of their way of life and the subsequent effects, the Indigenous peoples of Canada had no choice but to sign the numbered treaties as a way to preserve the Indigenous culture and people of Canada. Based on Indigenous cultural customs, treaties were traditionally viewed as flexible agreements that were not necessarily permanent and subject to renegotiation. Furthermore, “the sacred and binding character of treaties is not found primarily in the documents’ legalistic language. Instead, the true force of treaties is rooted in what was actually said, often in Indigenous languages, at the time of the negotiations”. Constrained by dire circumstances, the Indigenous peoples of Canada viewed the numbered treaties as a source of security and a way to adapt to the demands of the modern world within the context of their own traditions. They also perceived the treaties as “instruments of relationships between autonomous peoples who agree to share the lands and resources of Canada”. Through oral and written components, the Indigenous peoples came to believe that the Canadian government would provide the instruction and material aid necessary to successfully adapt to a new way of life.



Map demarcating the Treaties of Canada

This map depicts the locations of the Numbered Treaties 1 to 11. These historic post-Confederation Treaties were made in rapid succession over a short period of time from 1871 to 1921 between First Nations peoples and the Crown (Canada).



Pile of Bison Skulls

In the late 1870s, the bison population was in a steady decline, and by the 1880s, Plains First Nations and Euro-American and Canadian hunters were competing for the dwindling plains bison herds. The Canadian government in turn used the demise of the bison to coerce Indigenous peoples to comply with government settlement policy.

Despite Indigenous peoples’ expectations of the numbered treaties and hopes for the future, the subsequent outcomes resulted in bitter disappointment. Firstly, it became apparent early on that the Crown did not intend to fulfill certain promises. For example, during and after the famine of 1878-80, the Crown provided inadequate relief which left the Indigenous population in a continual state of hunger. At the mercy of a foreign power, the Indigenous peoples living on treaty land became highly susceptible to disease. Though the Indigenous peoples hoped to end crises of this nature through the numbered treaties, the vicious cycle of disease and famine began once again. In addition to unfulfilled promises, the crown also failed to recognize oral promises made during negotiations as legitimate. This includes promises regarding land use, natural resource use, fishing and hunting rights made during negotiation but not included in written version of the treaties. Due to errors in translation, the crown’s disregard of oral components and conflicting ideas on the permanence of the treaties, components of the numbered treaties remain a point of contention. To understand Canada’s current political climate, it is important for Canadians to know and understand the various interpretations of this issue. It is historical events like the numbered treaties that made the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Truth and Reconciliation Commission necessary.

Image: Kent Monkman, *The Subjugation of Truth*, 2016.

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numbered
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Re-evaluating Canada's history with a focus on Indigenous perspectives

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