“Deprived Of Part Of Their Living”: Colonialism and Nineteenth-Century Flooding of Ojibwa Lands

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INTRODUCTION

The destruction of resources essential to the traditional Ojibwa economy has been attributed by many Algonquian scholars to the fur trade. Anthropologists and ethnohistorians have overlooked the destruction of the native economy from 19th-century flooding, and have not considered changes to the Canadian Ojibwa economy as part of a larger process of colonial transformation which appropriated Indian lands and resources. Indian Affairs records extensively illustrate how the diversified economy of the Boundary Waters Ojibwa was radically transformed by the damaging effects of colonial encapsulation.

For Canadian anthropologists, flooding of Indian lands is usually seen as a 20th-century issue. In northern Canada, the impact of hydroelectric dams has been assessed for hunting bands. Mitigation, particularly in northern Quebec, has focused on the protection of a hunting-trapping resource base. A large literature has been generated on the contributions of hunting to the Cree economy (Charest 1982; Richardson 1975; Waldram 1988). Thus anthropological attention to flooding of hunting lands in the North in this century is well accepted.

Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the effects of earlier flooding in southern Canada. During the late 19th century, dams were constructed in northwestern Ontario to facilitate navigation and the production of lumber, most destined for the Prairies. Before the arrival of anthropologists, dams caused immense damage to the Ojibwa economy, inducing shifts in settlement and subsistence. Shoreline adaptations based on agriculture and wild rice were disrupted, fields were flooded, and villages were dispersed inland. Benefits accrued to non-Indian businesses and governments, while Ojibwa fields, in the words of one official, were “submerged... several feet under water so that boats could sail over them” (National Archives of Canada [NAC], RG 10, v. 3802, file 50265).
THE PRE-TREATY OJIBWA ECONOMY

The effects of extensive flooding are clear from the historic record, but early 20th century anthropologists such as John Cooper (1936) and Ruth Landes (1937a, 1937b, 1938, 1971) ignored this evidence. The Ojibwa were seen as an atomistic society within a timeless "ethnographic present". Landes' views emphasized hunting and trapping in a poor environment where the Ojibwa existed in small, isolated households. Her views preoccupied anthropologists (Barnouw 1950; Brown 1952; Eggan 1937; James 1954) and ethnohistorians (Hickerson 1962, 1967; Bishop 1970, 1974, 1978) who, on the basis of a minority of 19th-century trade records, identified environmental depletion and fur trade dependency as twin causes for a system of small, isolated hunting bands. The overall effect of these ethnohistorical studies was to shift the chronology of Landes’ interpretation of Ojibwa social organization to the fur trade period where it could be fitted into cultural ecological theory in anthropology (Lovisek et al. 1994).

The majority of primary historical documents provide a different picture of 19th-century Ojibwa. A Canadian official reported in 1868, "they have a sort of government... [and] are sufficiently organized, numerous and warlike, to be dangerous", a condition resulting from "abundance of food" afforded by rice, corn and sturgeon and a strong fur trade (Canada, Sessional Papers [CSP] 1869:20; CSP 1868:27). At this time, the Ojibwa had a diversified economy based on these resources in addition to large and small game, other fish, berries, and maple sugar (Vennum 1988:4; Holzkamm et al. 1988). Large assemblies based upon abundant seasonal resources or stored surpluses were the foundation for tribal government and elaboration of the Midewiwin (Densmore 1929:40; Hilger 1951:149–150; Hind 1860; Holzkamm et al. 1988; Waisberg and Holzkamm 1993).

Diversity was a major aspect of the Ojibwa economy throughout the 19th century, during which the regional population increased almost 400% from 455 in 1822 to 1,790 in 1875. To offset this increase, the

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1 James G. E. Smith (1973) attempted to reconcile the disparate interpretations of Ojibwa society by suggesting a more elastic framework. He argued from the extensive historical literature that the complexity of historical and modern forces affecting the Ojibwa during the 19th century promoted both atomistic and collective action, and that this balance constituted the core of the Ojibwa social dynamic.

In 1873, when Treaty No. 3 was signed, the Ojibwa controlled key economic locations in the region, such as fishing stations, rice fields, garden islands, and maple groves, which seemed to assure a viable future. Reserves were selected to include established production areas, mineral or timber lands, and hay meadows critical to farming. The signing of the treaty rapidly led to an influx of Canadian entrepreneurs including contractors for the Canadian Pacific rail line and lumber companies who required water power (Waite 1971:61, 113, 124, 128; Armstrong 1981:14–22). Ojibwa shoreline lands quickly became strategic targets for colonial development.
Ojibwa in the eastern part of the region (Figure 1), located closest to the route of western expansion, were first exposed to flooding from the construction of navigation dams.\(^2\) As early as 1872, a series of dams were placed in several locations, including one on the Seine River at Lac des Mille Lacs. Little more than a crudely constructed rock pile, the dam raised water levels on the lake. Despite the dam construction and reports of widespread flooding by Dominion Land Surveyor Robert Ross, no compensation was offered to the Ojibwa, as the government of Canada asserted instead a "common right" to wood and water travel (Lovisek 1994).

Despite the placement of the dam a farming village had been established at Sand Point in 1875. By 1882 less than half of the Lac des Mille Lac community cultivated on or near the reserve, the rest taking employment on the CPR, or fishing and hunting. Of the remaining 14 families only eight resided for any length of time on the reserve "only a small portion of the year" (CSP 1883:127). The decline in soil quality and crop failures after 1889 forced the Ojibwa to switch to trapping and hunting and move increasingly into wage labour. The early dam was improved by timber companies, and a permanent structure with stop logs was constructed in the 1920s. High water levels were maintained to assist hydroelectric plants downstream on the Seine River and at Fort Frances. By 1925 flooding of rice crops prompted the Indian Agent to remark that the band was "deprived of part of their living". The Lac des Mille Lacs dam has since the 1950s functioned as an important regulator of the Seine River hydroelectric system. Water on Lac des Mille Lacs has been kept well above natural average levels. The reserve village was abandoned during the 1950s (Lovisek 1994).

LAKE OF THE WOODS: "THE FLOODS KILLED THEIR RICE FIELDS"

The Rollerway navigation dam was built at an outlet of Lake of the Woods in 1887 by the Keewatin Lumbering Company with federal

\(^2\) The flooding of traditional or aboriginal lands was not restricted solely to the flooding of Lac des Mille Lacs. The construction of several dams at Lake Kashabowie, Kaogassikok Lake, Shebandowan, Windegoostegon and Sturgeon Lake similarly caused flooding of other traditional lands and off-reserve resources.
financial assistance. A submerged weir, the Rollerway dam raised the lake an average of three feet (International Joint Commission [IJC] 1917:16–17, CSP 1894:146),\(^3\) flooding gardens, rice beds, hay meadows and houses. Back water destroyed gardens 40 miles up Rainy River (CSP 1888:56, 1889:160). Among ten bands, the lost rice harvest was estimated at 5,000 bushels annually. At Whitefish Bay, Ojibwa complained that they “miss[ed] that staple of food with their fish very much, as they used to gather there annually upwards of 600 bushels, but now as the floods killed their rice fields they don’t know what to do in the future” (NAC, RG 10, v. 3802, file 50265).

Indian Affairs officials responded cautiously to what they anticipated would become massive destitution. Since the government had “never before been obliged to furnish food supplies to the Indians generally in these Districts”, Canada planned to restrict relief to actual cases of starvation: “actual starvation would ensue if they were not fed... all able-bodied Indians to support themselves by fishing, hunting, working in the shanties or at such labour as can be procured” (NAC, RG 10, v. 3802, file 50265).

An appropriation was prepared in 1888 for 60,400 pounds of flour, based on the projected replacement of rice. Fortunately for the budget of the Department, little relief was actually required: only 600 pounds of flour for 12 “old, sick widows and destitute Indians” (NAC, RG 10, v. 3802, file 50265).

Faced with flooding, the Ojibwa switched to increased trapping and hunting. Traders reported that by December 1888, “the Indians had already caught more fur” than last winter’s total. Some Ojibwa had gardens on elevated lands and continued economic production. Others sold canoes and sleds, or provided labour for lumbermen and fishing companies. Ojibwa also sowed rice in inland lakes and increased fall fishing (NAC, RG 10, v. 3802, file 50265; Moodie 1991:71). Although the Ojibwa were initially able to adapt to the flooding, many improvements in agriculture and housing were ruined.

\(^3\) Initial effects of the Rollerway Dam on the economy of the Lake of the Woods Ojibwa were evident by the fall of 1887 from reports from the Assabaska Agency, where wild rice crops failed and, later, the fall hay crop was lost.
The Ojibwa blamed "those who built the dam and raised the water in the lake" for their misfortunes. Chiefs sent numerous petitions to Ottawa, requesting a restoration of the natural flow and compensation. In a petition in 1892 eleven chiefs stated:

ever since the dam has been put up in the river, the water keeps high, destroying the wild rice crop, which is of the principal cause of starving in winter time — Apart from that the hay grounds are also flooded as well as our best gardens. The Department must be aware that our land, here, is not as on the plain. There are only spots that may be cultivated, the remainder being rock, so much so that we will be unable this year to get hay enough to feed our cattle... We have kept our part of the Treaty, is it not hard that the government should not keep theirs? (NAC, RG 10, v. 3880, file 92840)

Although the Indian Act prohibited unauthorized use of reserves, the government did nothing.

The Rollerway dam was replaced after 1893 by the Norman dam, which provided better control of water levels though the use of stop logs. Thereafter the provincial government regulated water levels on the lake through the Keewatin Power Company; the Company’s chief officer was John Mather, a close business associate of Clifford Sifton, the Federal Minister in charge of Indian Affairs between 1896 and 1905 (IJC 1916: 268–9; NAC, RG 10, v. 10294, file 487/8–4; Hall 1981:213, 214).

The average controlled level after 1892 was slightly more than three feet higher than the computed natural level. This average was frequently exceeded, particularly during the open water season, when annual flooding of five feet was frequent. This meant the Ojibwa experienced the effects of water level variations of 11 feet, counting from the lowest computed monthly level under natural conditions, 1052.9 feet, to the highest recorded level under control, 1063.9 feet (IJC 1917:20, 30).4

The International Joint Commission, a board established by Canada and the United States, conducted an inquiry into the best use of Lake of the Woods with a view to the importance to hydroelectric interests. It considered the effects of reconstructing the Norman dam and increasing outflow to permit more dependable power downstream on the Winnipeg

4 Data were computed to the nearest 0.25 foot from a graph entitled “Mean Monthly Levels, Lake of the Woods”, published quarterly by the Canada Lake of the Woods Control Board, Dept. of the Environment, Ottawa.
River. It studied levels which ranged from 1056 feet to 1064 feet, and called for input from interested parties (IJC 1917:11–12, 26, 28, 32).

The Department of Indian Affairs responded with inept and erroneous submissions to the Commission, stating that its files contained no information on flooding. The Kenora Indian Agent actually reported that high water would be a “benefit... as when the water is high they [Ojibwa] can gather any quantity of wild Rice.” High water in fact drowns wild rice. Although the head of the Department directed that no submission be made to the Commission and agreed with the federal Water Power Service to make private arrangements with power companies to compensate the Ojibwa, no arrangements were made. The Commission was informed by the federal Water Power Service that only 49 acres of Indian reserve lands would be affected at the proposed level of 1064 feet. This conclusion was not accepted by the Commission, whose engineers in 1917 concluded that 9,813 acres of reserves would be affected at the 1064-foot level, and recommended that these be set aside through formal easement (NAC, RG 10, v. 7585, file 6129–1, and v. 7777, file 27129–7).

Although the Norman dam was reconstructed after 1923, and a federal–provincial board established to regulate levels, easements were not officially established, and compensation was not made. The flooding continued.

In 1929, forty years after the initial flooding, an Indian Affairs official conducted an investigation of 39 of the flooded reserves. Unaware of the International Joint Commission findings, he did not conduct a survey and did not correlate his observations with the great range in water levels. Nevertheless, he concluded that reserves had lost land and rice fields valued at $22,325, not counting damage to muskrat habitat. The total area of land lost was reported as 1,765 acres, with 1,710 acres of rice fields inundated (NAC, RG 10, v. 7585, file 6129–1, part 1). Among them was Big Grassy Reserve 35G, which lost 300 acres of rice beds and 50 acres of land.

Although from time to time federal officials promised compensation for damages to lands and resources, not one penny has ever been paid to Canadian Ojibwa. Canada in 1939 paid compensation for flooded Ojibwa lands in the United States. That country had advanced claims for its territories on the south side of Lake of the Woods, which included
surrendered lands of the Red Lake Reservation. As well, non-Indian property owners on the Winnipeg River have also received compensation (CSP 1941:169, 189). There has been no lawful easement established, and the reservoir continues to flood thousands of acres of reserve lands.

LAKE WABIGOON: “BONES OF DEPARTED INDIANS ARE BEING CONTINUALLY WASHED OUT”

The Wabigoon Ojibwa village was inundated by flood waters from a navigation dam constructed in 1897 by Ontario officials as a replacement for a portage road. The dam flooded the reserve, raising the water an estimated six feet, “sometimes extending back half a mile or even a mile from shore” (CSP 1899:24; Archives of Ontario, RG 52). Judging by the measurements given in the sketches, the extent of flooded lands was approximately 905 feet for this stretch of road.

The Indian Agent responsible for the reserve made no reference to flooding in his reports at the time. The dam was reconstructed in 1912 for hydroelectric power by a paper company, and an additional 1 1/2 feet was added to lake levels (Archives of Ontario, RG 15). Without legal surrender or expropriation, the reserve had been reduced by about 18% or 1700 acres; as well, parts of the shore had been converted into islands. The Wabigoon River which had formerly flowed through the reserve as a stream had widened to 1/4 mile. Parts of the foreshore of both sides of the reserve had disappeared. Hay lands located at the mouth of the Wabigoon River, which had annually produced 50 to 60 tons of hay, were flooded as was wild rice, timber, eight homes and a graveyard “so that bones of departed Indians are being continually washed out of the bank.” A farming chief was forced off the reserve onto adjacent provincial lands (NAC, RG 10, v. 6613, file 6129–13).

Formal investigations did not occur until 1927. Following threats of litigation, the federal government convinced the paper company in 1929 to pay a portion of the damages represented by the increase in water of 1 1/2 feet after 1912 (NAC, RG 10, v. 6613, file 6129–13). The original rise of six feet was never compensated, as the Department of Indian Affairs neglected to advance a claim against the Province of Ontario. The island ownership question remains open. Ontario continues to grant water power leases which use the increased reservoir capacity, from which
benefits translate into tax revenue and jobs in the Euro-Canadian town of Dryden. No royalties are paid to the Wabigoon Ojibwa, while a significant portion of their reserve remains submerged.

RAINY LAKE: “USE, OCCUPY AND DAMAGE”

Construction of a power dam and paper mill across the Rainy River at Fort Frances began in 1905 and was completed by 1909. The dam, approved by the federal government, raised the water level approximately eight feet (IJC 1932:21). No consideration was given to the effects on the Rainy Lake Ojibwa. The Minister of Indian Affairs at the time, Frank Oliver, believed that Indians possessed “surplus land”. He told Parliament in 1906 that the “interests of the people must come first, and if it becomes a question between the Indians and the whites, the interests of the whites will have to be provided for” (Canada 1906:5422–35). Flooding destroyed Ojibwa houses, gardens, hay and rice fields, cemeteries, and eroded shorelines around Rainy Lake and up the Seine River to the first fall. Effluent from the mill degraded sturgeon spawning grounds on Rainy River and adversely affected drinking water quality. According to a petition from the Chief and Councillors of Little Fork Reserve to R. L. Borden, the Prime Minister of Canada, on 2 June 1913:

they put a Dam across the Falls at Fort Francis, Ont. and both Towns of Fort Francis and International Falls dump their Carbagges [sic] into the River and everything thats [sic] dirty and rutten [sic] and the water what we drinks in the River is getting worse and worse right along. At the present time as far as we know the water that is dirty now kills the Fishes along the River you are the man ‘as we heard’ and the american that let this Dam and paper Mill starts there at the Falls. The Paper Mills is the one who makes the River worse and worse for dumping their Carbbages [sic] in the River. We want you to have this Paper Mill pay us what ever the worth of his doing at the Falls, and also the both Towns, if you cannot get this party to pay us get them to give us one good Pump to each family on our little Reserve. (NAC, RG 10, v. 7842, file 30124–4)

The Fort Frances Agent initially dismissed complaints by Rainy Lake Chiefs, described as “a few crotchety kickers”. Ojibwa chiefs and councillors for every Fort Frances band forwarded petitions protesting the flood damage, expressing concern for rice, gardens and hay, and fear of potential hunger. Although the Ojibwa had sought protection before the
water levels were raised, they were ignored. Reports after 1909 noted eroded shorelines, where the “sugar-like” sandy soils dissolved; hay lands and cemeteries were submerged; homes were destroyed, forcing families to relocate; and damage was sustained to bridges and roads. A large part of one reserve at Stanjikoming became an island. The exact damage has never been properly quantified (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC], file 485/3-7, v.1).

The dam also caused damage to the Indian Agency buildings and a boarding school on one reserve close to Fort Frances. The Department of Indian Affairs sought protection and compensation, as did the Indian Agent for his rhubarb and raspberry gardens. Although some shoreline mitigation work was done, the Ontario and Minnesota Power Company refused to pay compensation, and lengthy litigation was commenced in 1918. In this case, the government did not include claims for most of the damaged reserves on Rainy Lake, only those adjacent to the Fort Frances Agency. The highest appeal court in the British Empire in 1924 affirmed the federal position, with variations which substantially reduced the compensation; assessment of compensation was ordered back to the trial court (NAC, RG 10, v. 8032, file 485/8–4, part 1).

Unfortunately the file was lost, legal counsel became ill, and nothing was done until 1938, by which time the company was in receivership. The government did secure some payment for past damages which were paid to the heirs of the original Ojibwa claimants in 1939. It also agreed to allow the company to flood many of the reserves forever, in the absence of the formal process established by the Indian Act. This easement cost the company nothing.

CONCLUSION: “GREAT HARDSHIP, AND DETRIMENT TO THEIR MEANS OF LIVING”

Loss of resources and lands from flooding was part of a larger process of colonial encapsulation for the Ojibwa (Waisberg and Holzkamm 1993). The federal government in 1881 asserted control over Indian commercial agriculture by prohibiting sales to non-Indian consumers. Cultivated lands declined thereafter, and commercial farming was replaced by small gardens. Flooding of these gardens led to further declines in cultivated acreage. The collapse of Ojibwa agriculture was
followed by the devastation of a major sturgeon fishery. By 1910 the once immense sturgeon resources of Rainy River had been eradicated (Holzkamm et al. 1988). Colonial pressures on resource use by the Ojibwa intensified after 1900 when provincial game wardens commenced enforcing game laws against the Ojibwa, despite assurances in Treaty No. 3 for continuation of resource rights. Market hunting, an important source of revenue after the decline of agriculture in the 1880s, was terminated, which constituted a “great hardship, and detriment to their means of living”. Trapping grounds were expropriated, and Indians driven off. Commercial fishing grounds were allocated to Euro-Canadians, despite their proximity to reserves and demonstrated Indian need (Tough 1991). In a copy of a petition from Long Sault Reserve signed by chiefs and councillors of Hungry Hall, Long Sault, Manitou Rapids, Little Forks and other bands in April 1909:

We feel the conditions of our times are not known as they really are here, at Ottawa. We are not seeking anything new but only want our dues agreed between us our fathers and this Government at North West Angle in the year 1873... We also wish to Fish for ourselves all the year and no reserve seasons for us. Its [sic] our daily food. We dont [sic] want to be stopped and game inspectors cutting our lines and taking our nets it is in our Treaty Papers and you are not right to take our privilages [sic] away. We do not molest your interests only want to live... We may not kill moose without someone interfering and being stopped. (INAC, file 485/3-7, v. 1, “Copy of a Petition, Long Sault Reservation”)

The root of government policy was the replacement of aborigines with white settlers and the fostering of business development, a common phenomenon in the British Empire (Packenham 1991). Among the late 19th-century developments actively promoted by both the federal and provincial governments were navigation and power. Although Ojibwa lands were protected by both Treaty No. 3 and the Indian Act, legal safeguards were consistently ignored in northwestern Ontario. The dual effects of coercive legislation and flooding are perhaps best summarized by a Rainy Lake chief:

At Hay Marsh Bay... we are prohibited to fish without license in our reserve and wherein also there is a great quantity of production destroyed for our living done by the power dam of Fort Frances, such as Rice crop, Hay marsh, Musk Rats, were all flooded by the backing
up of the water dam. We have been deprived of all our best of privileges and our Indian agent is the greatest enemy we have who does his best in working against us in curtailing our rights. (NAC, RG 10, v. 8032, file 485/20–3–14–1)

The destruction of resources essential to the traditional Ojibwa economy have been attributed by many Algonquian scholars to the fur trade. Anthropologists and ethnohistorians have overlooked the destruction of the native economy from 19th-century flooding, and have not considered changes to the Canadian Ojibwa economy from an imperial context of colonial transformation which appropriated Indian lands and resources.

By the time anthropologists appeared in the region in the early 20th century the economic situation had changed markedly from 1870. The Ojibwa had been prohibited from areas formerly affording them food sources and were reduced to a fraction of their former land base. Their shoreline resources had been appropriated as part of reservoir systems, revenue from which they have never seen. The flooding of native resources and lands continues today in northwestern Ontario, often illegally. Little or no compensation has ever been made to the Ojibwa.

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