

To Represent the Country in Egypt: Aboriginality, Britishness, Anglophone Canadian Identities, and the Nile Voyageur Contingent, 1884–1885

ANTHONY P. MICHEL*

When the British War Office requested a contingent of Aboriginal “voyageurs” from Canada to join the British government’s Nile expedition in 1884, recruitment of the contingent raised much public comment and fascination. To many anglophones, the call for voyageurs offered an opportunity to demonstrate Canadian loyalty and usefulness to the empire, and to garner national recognition. However, the role of Aboriginal boatmen in the expedition complicated such questions of national representation. Not only did the Aboriginal Nile voyageurs demonstrate their superiority as boatmen, challenging assumptions of Native inferiority, but their behaviour often contradicted the stereotypes usually applied to Indians. An important dimension of the emerging “national” identity for anglophones seems to have been the maintenance of a sharp distinction between “Canadian” and “Indian”, a distinction not always recognized by Britons. This unprecedented expedition thus provides an instructive case study in the contending and emerging narratives of cultural identity in Victorian Canada.

Quand le ministère britannique de la Guerre a demandé à un contingent de « voyageurs » autochtones du Canada de rejoindre les rangs de l’Expédition du Nil en 1884, organisée par le gouvernement britannique, le recrutement du contingent n’a pas manqué de susciter commentaires et fascination. De nombreux anglophones virent l’appel aux voyageurs l’occasion pour le Canada de faire preuve de loyauté et d’utilité envers l’Empire et de s’attirer la reconnaissance de la communauté internationale. Mais le rôle des marins autochtones durant l’expédition a jeté un pavé dans la mare de la représentation nationale. Non seulement les voyageurs autochtones du Nil démontrèrent-ils leur supériorité en tant que marins, contredisant ainsi la présomption d’infériorité des Autochtones, mais leur comportement allait souvent à l’encontre des stéréotypes usuels à leur endroit. L’identité « nationale » émergente

* Anthony Michel is a lecturer and doctoral candidate in the Department of History at Carleton University. The author would like to express his gratitude for the financial assistance received from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. He also acknowledges his appreciation for the insightful comments from anonymous reviewers, the editors, and participants of the 2004 Conference on Cultural Approaches to Canadian Nationalism.

des Canadiens anglais semblait s'appuyer en bonne partie sur le maintien d'une nette distinction entre la notion de « Canadien » et celle d'« Indien », une différence que ne reconnaissaient pas toujours les Britanniques. Cette expédition sans précédent nous permet donc de mieux comprendre les discours rivaux et nouveaux à l'égard de l'identité culturelle à l'époque du Canada victorien.

HUNDREDS OF Montrealers assembled on September 13, 1884, to witness the departure of the first Canadian contingent to participate in an overseas imperial campaign. Friends and family of river pilots from the Mohawk community of Kahnawake gathered to bid farewell as their men prepared to board the Atlantic steamer, the *Ocean King*. Already on board were 90 men from Manitoba. One-third of the Manitoba group were Sauteaux Ojibway, Swampy Cree, and Métis from the St. Peter's band near Selkirk; a third were experienced river navigators from various points in the Northwest. The rest of the Manitobans were adventure-seeking bank tellers, legal clerks, and other Winnipeg professionals. The largest segment of the contingent were shantymen from the Ottawa valley, both anglophones and francophones, who arrived by train in various states of inebriation. Workmen scrambled to finish loading supplies on board and carpenters put the finishing touches on bunks as this hurriedly recruited assemblage prepared to depart. After a stop in Trois Rivières to pick up one more group of *bûcherons*, the contingent halted for an inspection by Governor General Lord Lansdowne in Quebec City before proceeding to Egypt.

These civilian boatmen were to play an integral role in the British government's Nile expedition, which attempted to rescue General Charles Gordon, besieged in Khartoum by the armies of the Mahdi. "Many of the best-informed" in London, Canadians read, considered this campaign "by far the gravest undertaking in which Britain has embarked in any of her 'little wars'."¹ The exotic locale, the popularity of the tragic-heroic figure Gordon, rising imperial sentiments, and the dramatic religious dimensions of a "False Prophet" leading a holy war all ensured that the campaign was closely followed by newspapers throughout the Empire. In Canada, special attention was given to the boatmen, or the "Nile Voyageurs" as they were called. Never before had the British military called for a contingent of any sort from a settler colony. The stakes were high in terms of national honour and reputation.

This unprecedented expedition provides an instructive case study in the contending and emerging narratives of cultural identity in Victorian Canada. The novelty of a Canadian contingent serving overseas, the multi-ethnic nature of the group, the prestige of an imperial military campaign, and the prominent role of Aboriginal men all provided an opportunity for explicit public discussion on the nature of Canadian identity and national representation. Here, I focus on questions of identity raised by anglophone European-

1 *Winnipeg Sun*, September 12, 1884.

Canadians as they related to Britons from Great Britain and Aboriginal peoples in Canada.² To many anglophones, the call for voyageurs provided an opportunity to demonstrate Canadian loyalty and usefulness to the Empire. The role of Aboriginal boatmen in the expedition, however, complicated such questions of national representation.

Only C. P. Stacey and Roy MacLaren have analysed the place of the Nile Voyageurs in Canadian history. Stacey edited and published a large collection of archival records and wrote two articles that considered the expedition in the context of Canada's defence and external affairs policies. By such criteria, Stacey concluded that the Nile Expedition was admittedly of minor historical significance since the voyageurs were civilians, recruitment was organized by the Governor General, and the costs were assumed by the British government.³ MacLaren, in his book *Canadians on the Nile*, argued that the Nile expedition was one of several military conflicts that helped forge a distinctive Canadian identity: a step on the road from colony to nation. The voyageurs apparently reflected the appearance of an "essential Canadian character" and a "breed of men the new world produced". MacLaren claimed that, because "Canadians for the first time served abroad", this allowed them to "realize better their own nature" and revealed to themselves and others that "the *genus Canadenses* had begun to appear on the international scene".⁴ Much is to be gained by re-examining this episode in light of recent studies on culture, identity, and imperialism.

Recent scholarship on imperialism has underscored the extent to which late-nineteenth-century European Canadians considered themselves part of a British world with "a sense of belonging to a shared British culture", something long obscured by a nation-building historiography. While "Britishness has slowly been put back on the agenda" of the histories of Canada and the other settler colonies,⁵ it is still not sufficient to say that Canada was British. Rather, it is necessary to identify the unique ways in which Britishness was imagined by Canadians. In this light, the turn to empire has challenged historians to reinterpret Canada as a site of colonial settlement and Aboriginal dis-

2 This is not to suggest that Canada's experience in the Nile expedition can be reduced to these dynamics alone. Important categories of difference such as language, social class, region, religion, gender, and military/civilian distinctions are beyond the scope of this discussion.

3 C. P. Stacey, (*Records of*) *The Nile Voyageurs, 1884–1885: The Canadian Voyageur Contingent in the Gordon Relief Expedition* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1959); C. P. Stacey, "Canada and the Nile Expedition of 1884–1885", *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 33, no. 4 (December 1952), p. 319; C. P. Stacy with E. Pye, "Canadian Voyageurs in the Sudan, 1884–1885", *Canadian Army Journal*, vol. 5 (1951), Parts I–III: no 7, pp. 61–73; no. 8, pp. 58–68; no. 9, pp. 16–26.

4 Roy MacLaren, *Canadians on the Nile, 1882–1898: Being the Adventures of the Voyageurs on the Khartoum Relief Expedition and Other Exploits* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1978), pp. 159, 40.

5 Phillip Buckner and Daniel Francis, "Introduction", *Rediscovering the British World* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005).

placement. As Adele Perry reminds us, Canada was “a nation born and nourished on the double act of dispossession and repossession”.⁶

Stacey and MacLaren make only passing mention of Aboriginal boatmen in the expedition. In choosing to highlight this topic I am not attempting a compensatory or foundational history of Aboriginal participation in imperial campaigns, as valuable as that might be. R. Scott Sheffield, in his book *The Red Man's on the Warpath: The Image of the “Indian” and the Second World War*, clarifies that he did not write a history of Aboriginal peoples in the war, but of the Canadian “image of the ‘Indian’ ” in the war.⁷ Like Sheffield, I am concerned with what Canadians said about “Indians” on the expedition; however, my primary aim is to examine anglophone Canadian images of themselves. Anglophone Canadians, like all imagined political communities, have forged their identities not in isolation, but, as Charles Taylor writes, “through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others”. The dialogical character of human life and the formation of identity depends upon the winning of recognition from “others”, specifically from “significant others”, to use George Mead’s terminology.⁸ To understand the “practical identity formation” of anglophone Canadians as a process of “intersubjective recognition”,⁹ I identify some of the ways they desired to be represented to others and the ways in which they represented and described Aboriginals and Britons.¹⁰

As both colonized and colonizers, anglophone Canadians told themselves stories to explain their relationships with the British and with Aboriginals. In brief, there was a strong narrative of British identity, sometimes expressed as a desire for respect and equality as fellow-Britons, sometimes as a desire for recognition of certain distinctive Canadian qualities. There was also a consistent discourse that “Canadians and Indians” were distinct and separate, and that Aboriginal peoples existed outside the scope of the Canadian colonial project. These narratives are examined in the context of the events of the expedition.

Voyageurs from the Great Lone Land: The Nature of Wolseley’s Request

On August 20, 1884, shortly after the British government announced that it would send a relief expedition to Khartoum, the Colonial Office telegraphed

6 Adele Perry, “Canada and the Empires of the Past”, *History Compass*, vol. 1, DOI: 10.1111/j. 1478–0542.2003.0008.x (2003) NA 008, 1–4 [online journal], <<http://www.history-compass.com/viewpoint.asp?section=9&ref=8>>. See also Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making of British Columbia, 1849–1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

7 R. Scott Sheffield, *The Red Man's on the Warpath: The Image of the “Indian” and the Second World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), p. 10.

8 Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition”, in Ajay Heble and J. R. Struthers, eds., *New Contexts of Canadian Criticism* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1997).

9 Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 92

10 Once again, this article is necessarily limited in its scope to the ways anglophone Canadians defined themselves in relation to Aboriginal and British peoples. Francophone Canadians made up a significant portion of the contingent as well, and questions of national identity were reflected in a host of francophone texts, but many aspects of my larger research project are beyond the scope of this discussion.

the Governor General of Canada, Lord Lansdowne, requesting “300 good voyageurs from Caughnawaga, Saint Regis, and Manitoba as steersmen in boats for Nile expedition”. The telegram discussed logistics and the inclusion of a priest and three “officers of the Canadian militia”. A supplementary cable raised the number to 600 men and requested officers with experience in the Red River expedition.¹¹ Lansdowne immediately wrote to Sir John A. Macdonald to inform the Prime Minister that Viscount Melgund, the Governor General’s military secretary, would visit him to consult on the matter. Lansdowne believed the request came directly from General Garnet Wolseley, the former Adjutant-General of the British Army and recently appointed commander of the Nile Expedition, “and is founded on his Red River experiences”.¹² To understand the request for “voyageurs” from Canada, it is helpful to examine Wolseley’s conceptions of Canada, its Aboriginal peoples, and the Northwest frontier.

Wolseley’s memoir, *A Soldier’s Life* (1903), highlights his fascination with Natives. During a decade in Canada, he spent most of his time in urban settings, and yet he dedicated more space in his narrative to anonymous “Indian chiefs” whom he met only briefly than to friends and acquaintances such as Dr. J. C. Schultz and G. T. Denison, with whom he corresponded for years. Writing for a British audience familiar with *Boys Own Adventure* stories, Wolseley contrasted the idealized literary type of “Indian” with the “real Indians” he met. On his first night in Canada, arriving by train in Rivière-du-Loup, that “most out-of-the-way corner of our empire”, he told his reader that he was anxious to meet a “descendant of ‘Roaring Bull’ or of the lovely ‘Minnehaha’”. Fenimore Cooper’s novels, he said, had prepared him for a land “full of adventures in the backwoods, and of fights with painted and feather-bedecked Indians. Their cruel practice of scalping all those whom they killed made the relation of their chivalrous acts and fidelity to their promises all the more deeply interesting to a boy.”¹³ When he told the Commissariat Officer that he wished to meet an “Indian”, the man arranged for a “Micmac Chief” to come visit Wolseley. Wolseley described in great detail his disappointing first encounter with “an extremely dirty looking fellow” who smelled of whiskey and introduced himself with “a high-sounding Indian title”. Instead of “a fine, dignified-looking chief, dressed in furs and feathers”, like the “Indians described in Masterman Ready, that most thrilling of boy’s books”, he met this “watery-eyed old rascal”.¹⁴

11 “Lord Derby to Lord Lansdowne [August 20, 1884]” and “Lord Lansdowne to Lord Derby [August 23, 1884]”, Stacey, ed., (*Records of*) *The Nile Voyageurs*, pp. 55, 62. All subsequent references from Stacey refer to this volume of published documents.

12 “Lord Lansdowne to Sir John Macdonald, Aug 21”, in Stacey, ed., *The Nile Voyageurs*, p. 55

13 Field Marshal Viscount Wolseley, *The Story of a Soldier’s Life* (Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1903), p. 112

14 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

In his memoir, Wolseley's descriptions of Native people evoke a pathos from the collision of two seemingly contradictory narratives — the story of the noble savage and the story of the degenerate Indian. He imagined this chief as a fallen aristocrat, "from a long line of at least manly ancestors", no longer the master of "his forbear's dominions". As they parted, Wolseley said he "felt truly sorry for him in my heart, especially as I knew that his degradation was the result of the white man's rule". He contrasted a historical past, when the "Indian inhabitants led a healthy life of savagery", with their present, which had been poisoned by the alcoholism "which Europeans introduce into all lands they invade",¹⁵ making Aboriginal displacement seem both tragic and unavoidable.

When leading the Red River expedition north of Lake Superior, he met an Ojibwa chief who "made a long speech with all the manner of a well-bred English gentleman". He asked how much Wolseley "meant to pay him" as "compensation for our invasion of his hereditary hunting grounds". Wolseley admitted it was a valid question, for "what we in our superior wisdom" called "opening up the district" meant to this chief the end of his traditional way of life. In both encounters Wolseley claimed to respect the "historical Indian" and posed as a sensitive witness to the inevitable march of "civilization". "I have never encountered any Indian tribes", he wrote, "without experiencing a feeling of remorse not only for having robbed them of their hunting grounds, but still more for killing them off with the fatal poison of whiskey."¹⁶ He felt remorse but not personal responsibility for these changes, especially as a temperance advocate.

Yet, while Wolseley claimed that Aboriginal peoples were disappearing from the land, he also praised the skill and vigour of the Mohawk and Saulteaux boatmen he employed as "voyageurs" on the Red River expedition. The Mohawks had been "the most daring and skilful of Canadian voyageurs" but he imagined that by now, 30 years later, "the tribe" must have lost these skills due to the "enervating effect of civilization and whiskey" on "uneducated races".¹⁷ Wolseley could praise the loyalty of Native peoples at the same time as he was charged with suppressing a revolt. His account depoliticized the Métis of Red River. He told his readers that Riel was "a pure French Canadian" and an agent of the Quebec Catholic Church, which "dreamt of building" in the Northwest "another French province". This "plot", said Wolseley, "fell to pieces, like a castle of cards, the day I hoisted the Union Jack over Fort Garry".¹⁸ As though he were a second Wolfe, Wolseley projected onto Canadian domestic politics the longstanding conflict between England and

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 114–115.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 190–191.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 212–214.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 168–169.

France that was so central to British identity.¹⁹ In this formulation, he portrayed Natives as loyal and trustworthy subjects.

Wolseley's fascination with Aboriginal peoples was matched with his admiration for life on the Northwest frontier. His narrative alternated between descriptions of the urgency of his mission and descriptions of the Northwestern landscape, and, in the end, more space was dedicated to the brief time he spent in the "wilderness" than to the years spent living in urban Canada. In the Northwest, he claimed, "[T]he man wearied of life's mockeries might revel in the exquisite sensation of being alone and far away from the noisy and vulgar whirl of civilization."²⁰ The frontier left a similar impression on William Francis Butler, a member of Wolseley's trusted ring of officers. Butler's published memoir, *The Great Lone Land* (1872), was the most widely read account of the Red River expedition, and its title became synonymous with the frontier itself. Like Wolseley, Butler romanticized the Northwest as the site of freedom and vitality. Scottish voyageurs he met would never surrender "the wild roving life in the great prairie or the trackless pine forest" to "return again to the narrow limits of civilization."²¹ His first night sleeping on the shores of Lake Winnipeg with local Ojibwa left him awed by the beauty of his surroundings: "I little marvelled that the red child of the lakes and the woods should be loth to quit such scenes for all the luxuries of our civilization." He "thought with pity" for the fate of these people because he realized that, for now, "the land was still their own."²² For both Wolseley and Butler, the romanticized portraits of Natives in this symbolic geography were exercises in self-examination. As Tacitus projected his critiques of a decadent Roman culture onto the "noble" German "barbarians" he described, so too did many Britons articulate their own cultural ideals in representations of "noble savages" in the "Great Lone Land". Such romantic anti-modernism allowed Wolseley and Butler to lament the passing of one way of life and its "country" at the same time as they served as the agents of change, "opening up" the Northwest to "British civilization" and enforcing the sovereignty of the Canadian state in Manitoba. In this way, Canada's symbolic geography served several complex functions for Wolseley's imagined British identity.

Despite Wolseley's many experiences in Canada over a period of several years, Aboriginal peoples and the Northwest frontier loomed large in his mental image of Canada. The Canada he wrote about was a place where one could still encounter the "noble savage", unsoftened by too much civilization, but his colonial experience also convinced him that such figures were fast disap-

19 Linda Colley, "Britishness and Otherness", *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 31, no. 4 (October 1992), pp. 309–329.

20 Wolseley, *The Story of a Soldier's Life*, p. 205.

21 William F. Butler, *The Great Lone Land: A Narrative of Travel and Adventure in the North-west of America* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low & Searle, 1872), p. 109.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

pearing. Aboriginal displacement from the land, as Wolseley saw it, was an unavoidable consequence of grand historical forces, rather than a product of strategic expansion of the Canadian state and the British Empire. For the time being, however, Wolseley had faith that loyal Natives from Canada still possessed useful skills that could be placed in service of the Empire. These beliefs set the parameters for Canada's experience in the Nile expedition.

The Raising and Departure of the Nile Voyageur Contingent

The period of greatest government activity and public interest in the Nile voyageurs occurred between the announcement of recruitment in late August 1884 and the departure of the men in September. Government records and newspaper coverage reflected both the intense effort required to organize the group in just three weeks and the public fascination with this unprecedented situation.

“The white man is preferable to the Indian”

Within an hour of receiving the initial request, Governor General Lansdowne wrote to Sir John A. Macdonald, suggesting that Melgund “not lose a moment in putting himself in communication with the agents for these Indian settlements”.²³ But after Melgund met with Macdonald, who was both Prime Minister and Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs, the Governor General abandoned this idea, having been informed that times had changed since 1870. He cabled the Colonial Office to state that raftsmen from the province of Quebec and from the Ottawa Valley “would be preferable to Indian boatmen”.²⁴ The following day, on August 22, Lansdowne met with agents from the major Quebec lumber firms, while Melgund boarded a train to Ottawa to arrange similar meetings there.

The decision to use shantymen instead of Aboriginal voyageurs was reinforced by meetings with leading Canadian businessmen. One wrote to Melgund in Ottawa after his Quebec City discussions with Lansdowne, summarizing the views of his colleagues and affirming that “the white man would be more desirable for the task in question than the red man”.²⁵ The following day, Lansdowne wrote to Lord Derby at the Colonial Office to justify the change of plans. He noted that the request implied a preference for Natives, since “the settlements mentioned by Your Lordship” were “inhabited by Indians”. Canadian officials, wrote Lansdowne, informed him that “the freighting business formerly carried on by these people has greatly declined of late and that the best class of men” for river navigation were the raftsmen of the lumber industry. It was “unwise to restrict the selection” to the Iroquois

23 “Lord Lansdowne to Sir John Macdonald, Aug 21”, in Stacey, ed., *The Nile Voyageurs*, p. 55.

24 Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC] RG 7 G21 vol. 82, *Governor-General's Letterbooks to Colonial Office 1883–1887*, Lansdowne to Derby, August 21, 1884, p. 120.

25 LAC RG 7 G19 vol. 29, part 2, folder 38, “Transportation of Voyageurs”, Herbert M. Price to Melgund, August 22, 1884.

pilots and not feasible to get men from Manitoba. "I am assured by the most competent authorities that there is every reason for preferring a force composed of white men or partly of white men and partly of Indians to one composed exclusively of Indians and Halfbreeds," Lansdowne wrote. In any case, he noted, hiring shantymen would mean that "a sprinkling of Indians and Halfbreeds" would probably be included.²⁶ Two days later Lansdowne elaborated, explaining that he had recently "been informed" that, on the Red River expedition, a "considerable number of white men who represented themselves to be voyageurs" in reality had "no experience of River navigation". All of the "Indians", however, "were bona fide voyageurs" and "acquitted themselves creditably". While he assured London that he was doing his best to enrol some Indians, he was still of the opinion that "carefully selected white raftsmen are to say the least of it equal in skill and endurance to Indians and perhaps in some respects superior to them".²⁷

Lansdowne was redirected from Indian recruitment to the recruitment of Ontario and Quebec shantymen by Canadian political and business elites. The rationale provided to the newly arrived Governor General was that Canada was a rapidly modernizing country, no longer a frontier land inhabited by "Indians". In the 1880s, growing cities were paving their streets and installing electric lights. Newspapers regularly observed that the buffalo were gone and the frontier was receding before the advancing railway and waves of settlers. "History is made rapidly in the Northwest," noted one writer, commenting on Métis territory. "To-day, the hunter's domain is invaded by an array of engineers, and a year hence the echoes of the locomotive will resound in his eyrie."²⁸ Such "progress" was often enthusiastically embraced. At other times, journalists expressed a resigned tragic sense that, for example, the "glory of Fort Garry has departed. The historic ground where Riel used to prance around and boss the long-haired half breed soldiers of the new French Republic has been turned into a picnic ground, where church parties meet and assimilate corn starch ice-cream, and devour the solitary strawberry on the large plate."²⁹ In the discourse of a modernizing Canada, technological and cultural changes seemed to move with an unstoppable, non-human force, displacing "Indians" who were representatives of a bygone era. The political and business elites, both francophone and anglophone, considered Wolsley's request to be uninformed, and advised the Crown's representatives that lumbermen would make superior boatmen.

The War Office in London did not seem to agree. Officials there cabled back the message, "Decidedly give preference to Iroquois and Winnipeg voy-

26 LAC RG 07 G12 v. 82, *Governor-General's Letterbooks to Colonial Office 1883-1887*, Lansdowne to Derby conf. August 23, 1884.

27 LAC RG 07 G12 v. 82, *Governor-General's Letterbooks to Colonial Office 1883-1887*, Lansdowne to Derby conf. August 25, 1884.

28 *Winnipeg Sun*, September 1, 1884.

29 *Winnipeg Sun*, September 2, 1884, c.f. *Hamilton Spectator* as "current comment".

ageurs.”³⁰ At this point, nine days after the initial request, Melgund sent a telegram to Red River expedition veteran Col. William N. Kennedy in Winnipeg, asking him to recruit “fifty good men” from Manitoba, being “particular” that they were “really good boatmen”.³¹ No mention was made of “Indians”. The following day, Melgund cabled General Wolseley to ask, “Shall Indians bring large Canoe for your private use?”³² Yes, he replied, “Send canoe and plenty of spare bark and gum.”³³

Recruitment proceeded reasonably well from centres in Trois-Rivières, Kahnawake, Ottawa, and Peterborough. The Manitoba group was the last to be recruited and the first to depart from home. With such little time, many men were included who had little boating experience. Kennedy brought 90 men instead of 50, including a group of 30 from St. Peter’s reserve, many of whom were veterans of the Red River expedition.³⁴ After paying a visit to Kahnawake, Melgund expressed certainty that the Mohawks “will uphold their reputation as boatmen”.³⁵

After the insistent cable from the War Office, Lansdowne expressed doubts that he had responded correctly to the initial request. He told Melgund to contact “the Hudson Bay officials” who could probably “tell you more about these voyageurs than anyone else”.³⁶ Only at this point were serious attempts made to try obtain “voyageurs” from the west. A week later, the Indian agent from Port Arthur [Thunder Bay] wired to say that he had assembled “30 excellent canoemen and a foreman”, 20 of whom were First Nations boatmen from the Fort William [Thunder Bay] band, some of whom had been with Wolseley in 1870.³⁷ Because of the delay in advertising for such men and Melgund’s poor communications with them, the group could not obtain timely passage to Montreal and was disbanded. Local organizers complained to Melgund, affirming that these Natives from Rat Portage [Kenora] and Port Arthur were excellent men “accustomed to the discipline of the H. B. Cy.” and “perhaps the best canoemen on the continent”. Melgund was told that, when word spread of a British expedition, “young men everywhere” from “the different bands” showed a “great eagerness to join”. There would “be no difficulty in obtaining voyageurs, on timely notice, should a further contin-

30 “Lord Derby to Lord Lansdowne 28 Aug 1884”, in Stacey, ed., *The Nile Voyageurs*, pp. 65–66.

31 Melgund to Kennedy, August 28, reprinted in *Manitoba Free Press*, August 30, 1884.

32 “Melgund to Wolseley 30 August 1884”, in Stacey, ed., *The Nile Voyageurs*, p. 67.

33 “Wolseley to Melgund, 1 Sept 1884”, in Stacey, ed., *The Nile Voyageurs*, p. 70.

34 The band at St. Peter’s had its lands appropriated by the town of Selkirk in 1905. The band members were relocated further north and are today the Peguis First Nation. For an early history, see Carolyn F. Podruchny, “‘I Have Embraced the White Man’s Religion’: The Relations between the Peguis Band and the Church Missionary Society, 1820–1838”, *Papers of the 26th Algonquin Conference*, vol. 26 (1995), pp. 350–378.

35 “Melgund to Lansdowne 3 October 1884”, in Stacey, ed., *The Nile Voyageurs*, p. 82.

36 “Lansdowne to Melgund 30 Aug 1884”, in Stacey, ed., *The Nile Voyageurs*, p. 69.

37 LAC RG7 G19 vol. 29, part 2, folder 38, “Transportation of Voyageurs”, Donnelley to Melgund, September 8, 1884.

gent be required for the Nile Expedition”.³⁸ Clearly, Native boatmen had not vanished in the face of a quickly modernizing Canada.

In the end, approximately 20 per cent of the boatmen were Aboriginal men, which was fewer than Wolseley had desired and more than Canadian experts had recommended. In his official report on the recruitment of the contingent, Melgund justified the deviation from the War Office’s request by arguing, “The bona fide ‘voyageurs’ have in many districts now become extinct. The Country which fourteen years ago supplied the water transport of the Red River Expedition is now intersected by Railroads, and except in the remote North West long canoe journeys are no longer necessary.”³⁹ Lansdowne’s initial instinct had been to recruit Native boatmen. Canadian elites had then introduced the idea that “Indians” of this type no longer existed. Such an idea seemed difficult to dislodge, despite the rapid selection of men from St. Peter’s, the obvious potential of more men from Rat Portage, Port Arthur, and Fort William, and the positive impression Melgund took away from his visit to Kahnawake. Only after an insistent directive from London did the organizers belatedly, and somewhat reluctantly, attempt to fill the original request.

“A share of the glory”

From initial reports of a “Canadian boat brigade” for the Nile expedition⁴⁰ to detailed descriptions of departure ceremonies as the boatmen left Canada, a wide range of views was expressed in the popular press concerning the Nile Voyageur contingent. From the outset, the public was informed that the British government’s initial request had been modified. General Wolseley, readers were told, learned during the Red River expedition about river navigation in small boats, using Indian voyageurs. “In the present case it was Indians that the British Government requested. On enquiry, however, Lord Lansdowne ascertained that Canadians were equally as expert, if not better in performing the duties required as were Indians.”⁴¹ Such language reflected a social consensus on differences between “Canadian and Indian”. Newspapers turned their attention to the implications of “Canadian” participation in such a campaign.

Many observers responded enthusiastically to reports of Canadian participation in such an important campaign. The editors of the *Montreal Witness* seemed glad to learn that “Lord Wolseley was quick to recognise the valuable qualities of the Canadian voyageur ... instead of forgetting them.”⁴² Dr. J. L.

38 LAC RG7 G19 vol. 29, part 2, folder 38, “Transportation of Voyageurs”, Dawson to Melgund, October 25, 1884.

39 “Melgund to Lansdowne 3 October 1884”, in Stacey, ed., *The Nile Voyageurs*, p. 82. Irregular capitalization in original.

40 Winnipeg *Daily Times*, August 26, 1884.

41 *Ottawa Free Press*, August 27, 1884, reprinted verbatim in the Winnipeg *Daily Times*, August 28, 1884, and the *Manitoba Free Press*, August 29, 1884.

42 Reprinted as “current comment”, Winnipeg *Daily Times*, August 30, 1884.

H. Neilson, the contingent's medical officer, told a Montreal *Star* reporter that the expedition "will bring the country very much into prominence, not only in England but in Europe more especially as it is a complete departure from the custom of the War Department".⁴³ The Winnipeg *Daily Times* was pleased Melgund would "distribute the honors of the Khartoum expedition" by allowing "our province" to "enjoy a share of the glory of the Khartoum expedition".⁴⁴ It was not enough for colonials to "imagine" themselves part of the British Empire; they depended on being recognized as such. It was one thing to declare, as editorialists sometimes did, that "Britons and Canadians are one people inhabiting one country. This is no longer a colony of the empire but a part of it."⁴⁵ It was another thing to have the British acknowledge Canada's importance.

Responding to a *Punch* cartoon about Imperial Federation, which represented the Empire as a cricket team, the Winnipeg *Sun* expressed shock at Canada's absence: "all our efforts to attract the attention of England", it commented, were seemingly fruitless, for "here we are, cat dead [*sic*] by Punch and deemed of no account beside the motley colonists at the Cape."⁴⁶ When another British paper recommended Canada for emigration, but also noted that "Canada practically is an undiscovered country as far as the average Englishman is concerned", such news was described as a severe "blow". Canada was apparently as unfamiliar to the average Englishman "as if it were the colony of a foreign country" — and this "after all the congratulations which we have been indulging in as to the amount of knowledge disseminated by tons of immigration literature, by displays of our products made at agricultural and other exhibitions, and by the meetings and speeches of many Canadian and English statesmen".⁴⁷ In the context of such strong desires for recognition from Britain, many expressed satisfaction that Canada had not been forgotten by those planning the prestigious Nile campaign.

Such imperial enthusiasm was not universal, however. The Winnipeg *Sun* said the "theory that tens of thousands of Canadians are thirsting to serve Her Majesty abroad" might have sounded good "in the speeches of foaming Jingoists like Lord Lorne and Sir Charles", but it had "no foundation in fact".⁴⁸ *Grip* magazine called Canadian newspapermen irresponsible and "unpatriotic in the extreme" to promote the Nile expedition and "try and induce poor and ignorant fellows" to volunteer for such a dangerous mission. In a poem about "a Canuck named Bill Boyle" published in *Grip* magazine, the media "talked at", "pounded into", and "growled at" Bill Boyle to entice him to

43 Montreal *Star*, September 9, 1884.

44 Winnipeg *Daily Times*, August 28, 1884.

45 Winnipeg *Daily Times*, September 15, 1884.

46 Winnipeg *Sun*, September 15, 1884.

47 Winnipeg, *Sun*, October 3, 1884.

48 Winnipeg *Sun*, August 28, 1884. Lorne had been the Governor General before Lansdowne and Charles Tupper was Canada's High Commissioner, both in London at that time.

enlist for the sake of “England” or “glory”. When it became clear he had “no taste for the Nile”, Bill’s critics replied, “No good Briton are you!” to which he responded, “That is true, I’m the growth of the Canadian sile!”⁴⁹ While imperial enthusiasm seemed the norm in anglophone Canada, it was certainly not embraced by everyone.

Many commentators expressed disappointment that Canada would be sending boatmen rather than soldiers. When news of the request for boatmen broke, the offices of the Governor General, the Prime Minister, and the Militia were inundated with inquiries from Canadians seeking “active service” in the Sudan.⁵⁰ The British military was not interested in troops from the colonies, however, a reality that some editorialists regretted. Instead of participating in battles at the front, “the Canadian contingent may expect to be left” in Dongola with the boats, and “twenty-one days’ rowing up the river and a like voyage down will be the extent of their share in the expedition”.⁵¹ The *Winnipeg Sun* called the boatmen “a grade of soldier only a few degrees higher than the army mule” and said that the contingent’s “efforts at the oar, however strenuous, and its heroism in ‘packing’ supplies past the cataracts, however noble, will not reflect immortal honor upon the country”.⁵² Such comments reflected not only the prestige associated with soldiering, but also the desire to be acknowledged as equals in, not servants for, the Empire.

The civilian nature of the contingent was imposed by the imperial government, and those deemed best suited for the jobs were working-class men who made their living far from urban centres.⁵³ When several young middle-class professionals from Winnipeg were engaged, concerns were raised. The *Sun* criticized the recruitment of “young Englishmen, young lawyers, clerks and neer-do-wells” ignorant of boating.⁵⁴ Letter writers called them “weaklings” in comparison to “the Ottawa men” and the “coureurs de bois” and begged authorities to contact the Hudson Bay Company and St. Peter’s for some real voyageurs.⁵⁵ Such responses reflected the appeal of the sturdy, frontier-shaped Canuck as a representative. The importance of this ideal-type became evident when the hardiness of Canadians was called into question in the British press.

In early September, reports began to circulate that British commentators questioned the wisdom of employing Canadians. Unnamed “Egyptian

49 *Grip Magazine*, September 27, 1884.

50 See especially LAC RG 07 G-19 vol. 29, part 2, folder 38, “Transportation of Voyageurs”; see also LAC RG 25 A-1, Colonial Office Correspondence, vol. 35, August-October 1884.

51 *Manitoba Free Press*, September 9, 1884.

52 *Winnipeg Sun*, September 5, 1884.

53 The motivations of these working-class boatmen were diverse and did not necessarily coincide with the public discourses found in the newspapers, magazines, and published memoirs to which this research is limited.

54 *Winnipeg Sun*, September 13, 1884.

55 *Winnipeg Daily Times*, September 5, 1884.

experts in London” declared it “simply murder to take these men into the Nile region, accustomed as they are to a cool climate and a meat diet”. The “burning sand”, aridity, and light rations “would kill them as frost kills flies”.⁵⁶ Canadian editorials demanded: “Who are the experts? Upon what data do they judge? Why will it be murder in the case of Canadians and not of Englishmen?” Blame was placed on those who imagined that “Canadians come from a land where everlasting winter reigns”.⁵⁷ Mr. Stavely Hill, an English Tory MP, publicly criticized the use of Canadians and boarded a steamer with the stated purpose of trying “to dissuade the Canadians from enlisting for a service which would end in their certain death”.⁵⁸ The Canadian newspapers reflected a deep sense of insult at such “melancholy forebodings” of the British press.⁵⁹ The British military newspaper *The Broad Arrow* said that “the indignation of Canadians” over the matter “seems likely to be not quickly subdued” and “the slur cast upon the hardihood of the Canadian voyageurs will not be a subject which the Canadian papers will quickly let drop”.⁶⁰ Why did these British comments cause such insult?

While anglophone Canadians frequently expressed their desire to be treated as equals in the Empire, there were also competing discourses of distinction. Sometimes these were evident in an emphasis on Canadian democratic qualities, common-sense pragmatism, or hardiness. The idea that colonial life bred masculine virtues, with its close proximity to the northern wilderness, was shared by many in both Canada and Britain. Wolseley thought Canadian soldiers were “in some respects ... better than our Regulars, for, owing to their colonial bringing-up, they have more initiative, and are more self-reliant”.⁶¹ Rudyard Kipling’s poem “The Islanders” contrasted the virile Canadians and Australians in the South African War, “men who could shoot and ride” from the “Younger Nations”, with the enervated Britons, “flanneled fools at the wicket or the muddled oafs at the goals”.⁶² Such British comments on Canadian “others” were critiques of British society, but the glorification of the hardy Canuck shaped by nature served different needs in Canada.

Gillian Poulter argues that anglophone Canadians attempted to invent a new national identity in the late nineteenth century through the appropriation and reconfiguration of Aboriginal cultural practices. “Urban anglophone colonists” in Montreal, through their participation in “indigenous and indigeniz-

56 *Montreal Star*, September 3, 1884.

57 *Ottawa Free Press*, September 3, 1884.

58 *Montreal Star*, September 3, 1884; see also *Ottawa Free Press*, September 5, 1884; *Winnipeg Daily Times*, September 8, 1884.

59 *Ottawa Citizen*, September 13, 1884.

60 *Winnipeg Sun*, October 15, 1884, reprinting an excerpt from *The Broad Arrow*, September 27, 1884.

61 Wolseley, *The Story of a Soldier's Life*, p. 211.

62 Robert H. MacDonald, *The Language of Empire: Myths and Metaphors of Popular Imperialism, 1880–1918* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 40–41.

ing” sports like snowshoeing and tobogganing, were taking part in “cultural performances” aimed at the invention of “a new British type of native Canadian”.⁶³ Urban Canadians “played Indian”⁶⁴ with such enthusiasm that one American observer remarked that they seemed to have been “born in blanket coats and snowshoes!”⁶⁵ Another American paper described “the misleading Canadian habit of dressing in furs and snowshoes when photographs are taken for distribution among English friends”.⁶⁶ It should not be surprising that snowshoe clubs, lacrosse, and canoeing were popular not among Aborigines or working-class Canadians, but among the urban elites furthest from the frontier and with the least contact with First Nations peoples. Snowshoeing on the accessible “frontier” of Mount Royal helped many Victorians invent an identity as “native Canadians”. Yet, when such imagery was reflected back to infer that Canadians could not bear the Egyptian sun, it evoked frustration with British stereotypes of a frozen, frontier Canada and feelings of outrage that Canadian masculinity had been maligned.

When British “commentators” questioned the adaptability of “Canadians”, however, they were in fact talking about “Indians”. This was clear only in the first article to appear in Canada. According to the *Ottawa Free Press*, London papers quoted British officers stationed in Canada as saying that “Iroquois Indians, taken from the frosty climate of Canada”, could not withstand tropical heat. The “climate of Upper Egypt will be fatal to the Lachine Indians, and Lord Wolseley will need stretchers and ambulances instead of boats.”⁶⁷ Such remarks about Mohawks are consistent with climatic and racial theories of the day, but Canadians who thought the comments were directed at them saw a British preoccupation with Canada’s cold climate as the only explanation. It did not occur to them that British remarks about “Canadians” might have referred to “Indians”. Britons did not always observe the strict distinction maintained by colonials between “Canadian and Indian”. They frequently called First Nations peoples “Canadians” or used them to represent Canada. On the occasion of Queen Victoria’s Silver Jubilee, for example, a commemorative tableau depicting the Empire represented all other “white” colonies with images of settlers. Canada was represented by a trapper and a “Red Indian”.⁶⁸ Such blurring of racial categories by the British led to both confusion and ambivalence during the Nile expedition.

63 Gillian Poulter, “Montreal and its Environs: Imagining a National Landscape, c. 1867–1885”, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 3 (Fall 2004), pp. 69–100.

64 See Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Rayna Green, “The Tribe Called Wannabee: Playing Indian in America and Europe”, *Folklore*, vol. 99, no. 1 (1988), pp. 30–55.

65 *Montreal Star*, March 7, 1884.

66 *Montreal Star*, September 13, 1884, reprinting undated commentary from the *Springfield Republican*.

67 *Ottawa Free Press*, September 2, 1884.

68 MacDonald, *The Language of Empire*, p. 49.

“The old warlike spirit”

The media considered Native recruitment an interesting and exotic side story in the enlistment of “Canadians”. In an article about Kahnawake, entitled “Indian Braves for Egypt”, the *Gazette* spoke of the “enthusiasm” shown by the “younger men of the tribe” towards the request for 50 river men.⁶⁹ Chief White Eagle, a Red River veteran, supposedly told reporters “he would be glad to fight the Queen's enemies anywhere, because England always treated the redskins fairly”.⁷⁰ The call for boatmen caused a “sensation in Caughnawaga” and the “youngest Indians jumped at the offer with enthusiasm”. Although the matter would have to be decided at a “council of chiefs”, it seemed clear to the *Ottawa Citizen* reporter that the “old warlike spirit of the Iroquois appears to have been aroused” and that “the ever faithful allies of the British will answer the call of duty to the far east”.⁷¹ However, when the expected “council of chiefs” did not take place the next night, “the most enthusiastic of the reds contented themselves with discussing the proposal”, from which development the reporter gleaned that “the men are not disposed to go fight, but only for navigation purposes”.⁷² This stereotypical language, remarkably similar to the discourse identified by Sheffield in newspapers of the 1940s,⁷³ exoticises the Kahnawake men, reinforcing colonial racial distinctions.

Despite the expectations evident in such newspaper commentary, Mohawk river pilots were more concerned with wages than warfare. The pay offered by the British Army was considered good for Ottawa shantymen, but, for the Mohawks who piloted the Lachine rapids, the wages did not seem adequate given the risks involved. The *Winnipeg Sun*, which took a sour view of the whole expedition, noted on August 30 that “the enthusiasm of the Caughnawaga Indians for the Khartoum expedition has fizzled out. They want a guarantee against death and refuse to engage for longer than six months.” A few days later, the *Montreal Star* noted that few had enrolled, due to “what they consider small wages”.⁷⁴ In an article entitled “LO! THE WISE INDIAN”, the *Sun* made its opinions on the entire expedition quite clear.⁷⁵ The reluctance of some Mohawks revealed an “Indian wisdom” when it aligned with editorial opinion. Months later, when the *Sun* had abandoned its early scepticism towards the expedition, it reminded readers of the enrolment of the St. Peter's band, those “dusky natives who have often responded to the war-whoop and whose loyalty to their Great Mother would put some of us to shame”.⁷⁶ Such coded commentaries do not reflect the motivations of the

69 *Montreal Gazette*, August 28, 1884.

70 *Ottawa Free Press*, September 2, 1884.

71 *Ottawa Citizen*, August 28, 1884.

72 *Ottawa Citizen*, August 29, 1884.

73 Sheffield, *The Red Man's on the Warpath*, pp. 63–74.

74 *Montreal Star*, September 3, 1884.

75 *Winnipeg Sun*, September 3, 1884.

76 *Winnipeg Sun*, December 31, 1884.

actual Aboriginal men involved, but are instead part of a Euro-Canadian patriotic self-critique. As the editorial board of the *Sun* moved from scepticism towards support for the imperial campaign, both positions were given rhetorical authority when presented as the opinions of “wise” or “loyal” Aboriginal men.

Native boatmen received the most attention from the press, however, as the contingent assembled for departure. The first group to leave home were the Manitobans. Winnipeg city council considered an official send-off, but did not wish to spend any money, so “contrary to general expectation, there was no organized demonstration arranged to mark the departure”, although an estimated 2,000 people came to the train station to say farewell.⁷⁷ Winnipeg papers described an emotional farewell scene for all, except for the St. Peter’s men. A *Sun* article subtitled “Goodbye, My Lover, Goodbye” paid special emphasis to the “many affecting incidents” to be seen, as friends and sweethearts said their goodbyes. The “only men who preserved their sang-froid were the native voyageurs, who looked on unconcernedly at all the bustle around them.”⁷⁸ The paper failed to mention that these men had said their goodbyes in St. Peter’s, much earlier in the day, before travelling to Winnipeg.

In Ottawa, almost 200 boatmen had their photographs taken on Parliament Hill as the “Governor General’s Foot Guards played several popular airs” such as “En roulant ma boule”, “The Girl I Left Behind”, “Auld Lang Syne”, and “Be it Ever so Humble There’s No Place Like Home”.⁷⁹ The band then led the men in a procession “followed by thousands”, as “flags floated” and handkerchiefs waved from windows en route to the train station. A *Citizen* reporter saw evidence of the “loyalty of Canadians, especially the residents of the Capital, to the British Crown”. Such enthusiasm “could not have been more marked had it taken place in the capital of the British Empire instead of the capital of a colonial dependency”.⁸⁰

As the contingent came together on September 13, its multi-ethnic nature regularly evoked comment in the newspapers. The “composition of the party was by no means uniform”, wrote one reporter, calling the group a “heterogeneous conglomeration of human elements”. In describing their drunken journey between Montreal and Quebec City, he noted that in “such a mixed assembly, trouble, under the circumstances, would not be an unnatural result”.⁸¹ British papers at this time were mocking the “heterogeneous forces for Gordon’s relief”, which were to include 300 Kroomen from West Africa “as hewers of wood and drawers of water for the British soldiery”. If the “international character which the expedition will assume with these allies” was the source of “numerous jokes and cartoons”, and if Canadian papers

77 *Winnipeg Sun*, September 8, 1884.

78 *Ibid.*

79 *Ottawa Free Press*, September 13, 1884.

80 *Ottawa Citizen*, September 13, 1884.

81 *Ottawa Citizen*, September 15, 1884.

assumed that heterogeneity and mixture would constitute trouble, this did not bode well for the possibility that such a “mixed assembly” could represent a nation.⁸²

In his memoir, James Deer described the departure of his Kahnawake group, accompanied by “sorrowful good-byes and warm wishes of a host of friends” who came to Montreal.⁸³ To Euro-Canadian observers, however, the Mohawk families presented an exotic scene. Dr. Neilson’s diary comments on the “mothers, sisters, wives, cousins, and a sprinkling of papooses”.⁸⁴ A reporter from the *Citizen* thought the Mohawks “attracted not a little attention” as they were “surrounded on board by their squaws, from whose eyes tears flowed copiously, while the children and the papooses in arms stared with their black eyes”. Some “spoke very good English, and all were demonstrative in proclaiming their readiness to die for the ‘Great Mother’, whom one of the aborigines from the North-West proclaimed as his ‘dear Sovereign’.”⁸⁵ A *Globe* reporter also focused on the “squaws and papooses”, saying “the confusion was undescrivable” until they left.⁸⁶ Such exclusive vocabulary, in place of “women” and “babes”, maintained the boundary between settler and Native.

The Mohawk boatmen were generally presented quite favourably, with a special emphasis on their manly qualities. They looked “every inch the typical voyageur, clean of limb, strong of nerve and alert in all their movements”. They were also represented in various “affecting scenes”, as “mothers embraced their boys, wives their husbands, daughters their fathers and girls their beaux, and though evidently with true Indian reticence they strove HARD TO CONCEAL THEIR FEELINGS many a tear was dropped and many a bosom heaved convulsively as the moment for separation came.”⁸⁷ One boatman consoled his girl, “saying he would kill half-a-dozen Arabs before he got back”, while “another fine-looking young Indian” told the reporter, “No married, but sure thing when I come back.”⁸⁸ Encounters with actual Natives challenged any assumption of degenerate, disappearing Indians and expectations about reticent, stoic types.

Reporters were also surprised and impressed with an unnamed Mohawk who delivered a speech “to the crowd of on-lookers in a loud voice, with extraordinarily animated gesticulation, and in a spirit of great enthusiasm”. The *Citizen* reported that this “dusky orator” spoke of “the loyalty of his tribe to the Queen and to the British Government, and expressed their readiness at all times to sacrifice their lives in the Imperial cause”, words that won great

82 *Ottawa Free Press*, August 30, 1884.

83 James Deer, *The Canadian Voyageurs in Egypt* (Montreal: John Lovell & Son, 1885), p. 3.

84 LAC MG29 E37, John Louis Hubert Neilson Fonds, “Nile Expedition Diary”, September 9, 1884.

85 *Ottawa Citizen*, September 15, 1884.

86 *Toronto Globe*, September 15, 1884.

87 *Winnipeg Sun*, September 18, 1884. Emphasis in the original.

88 *Ibid.*

applause from both “his comrades and by his audience”.⁸⁹ The *Sun* said he was “haranguing from the ship’s side a couple of hundred Indians, whites and half-breeds”, but complimented “HIS RHETORICAL POWERS”. He “pounded the ship’s bulwarks” and “threw his arms about in graceful curves”:

The burden of his eloquent utterances was that the Queen and the Iroquois Indians were allies, that in virtue of the treaty of amity and comity established, the Queen called upon them in the person of Lord Melgund, and told them General Wolseley, who knew the Iroquois well, wanted them to give a helping hand to rescue one of her great generals. That call they gladly responded to. Their wives and families were willing they should exposed themselves to unknown dangers at the call of the Queen, and they were going with glad hearts when they thought of the great Mother and General Wolseley, but with sorrowful feelings when they thought of their homes.⁹⁰

This description seems predictably informed by a script of loyal “braves” talking in broken English. Yet aspects of the speaker’s message penetrates such settler discourses. The specific nature of Mohawk “loyalty” expressed in these two sources resonates with the long-standing claim of Mohawk communities that they were not imperial subjects, but imperial allies who had never surrendered their sovereignty,⁹¹ claims rejected by Dominion officials.⁹² Significantly, Mohawks and the Saulteaux at Montreal pledged their loyalty not to the Dominion government, but to the Queen.⁹³

The final stories from Canadian reporters commenting on this “mixed assembly” came from Quebec City. After picking up the last group of men from Trois-Rivières, the *Ocean King* stopped in Quebec to be inspected by the Governor General. Lansdowne tailored his address to francophone Canadians, anglophone Canadians, and “Indians”. In English, he began by saying that he was glad that “the Dominion” would “be represented” on the expedition, showing “the whole world that the British Empire means something more than the British Islands”. The British government, he reminded them, “had the four quarters of the globe to draw from” in looking for boatmen, but “turned its eyes at once to the Dominion of Canada”. Lansdowne expressed his confidence that the men would perform their duties well, and he reminded

89 *Ottawa Citizen*, September 15, 1884.

90 *Winnipeg Sun*, September 18, 1884. Capitalization and inset emphasis in original.

91 J. R. Miller, “Petitioning the Great White Mother: First Nations’ Organizations and Lobbying in London”, in Phillip Buckner, ed., *Canada and the End of Empire* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005), p. 309.

92 Sheffield, *The Red Man’s on the Warpath*, pp. 52, 58.

93 See Miller for a good overview of the meaning of kinship metaphors such as “Great Mother” in Aboriginal diplomatic language and the political consequences of Canadian misunderstandings of this language based on Victorian cultural norms of parent-child relations (“Petitioning the Great White Mother”, *passim*).

them that they carried “the reputation of your own country” which must be brought back “without blot or blemish (Great applause)”.

He then turned his attention to “those men of the Indian race”, telling them that General Wolseley “begged particularly that we would not forget the men of Caughnawaga and the Indian settlements of the west (Applause)”, which was somewhat of an understatement. He was “sure that you will show yourselves worthy of Lord Wolseley’s high opinion of you”. To close, he reminded them that “the Government of the Dominion has always endeavoured to deal justly and fairly with you. Your people are as loyal to the Queen of England as her white subjects, and I am glad to see that so large a number of you are ready to accept service under her,” which remark was received with “Loud applause”.

In the third portion of his speech, Lansdowne told francophones, in French, that they belonged to “a bold and resolute race, the descendants of those warlike mariners who centuries ago laid the foundation of the Dominion upon the shores of the St. Lawrence”. Although “for a time your fathers and ours fought each other for the possession of this country (Cheers)”, today we work “peacefully and side by side with each other as citizens of the same Empire and subjects of the same sovereign (Cheers)”. He praised the qualities of their dexterity, strength, courage, and song.⁹⁴

To each group, Lansdowne delivered a different political message — loyalty to British Empire, fair treatment for Indians as imperial subjects in Canada, ancient battles between English and French long resolved — and different appeals to manly honour. The precise language of the speech identified anglophones and francophones as “Canadians” who stood “side by side”. The “Indians”, included at the personal request of Wolseley, would represent their “race”. Monseigneur Henri Têtu, who had come to say goodbye to his friend, Father Arthur Bouchard, the contingent’s chaplain, recorded his memories of this scene years later. He too found it difficult to make sense of the Aboriginal dimension of this group. “Quel assemblage étrange!” he wrote. The sight of “des figures hâlées, quelques unes aux traits durs et féroces” and “ça et là les sinistres visages des Iroquois de Caughnawaga” left with him an impression that “je n’oublierais jamais.” He was neither enthusiastic nor proud, he said, to see these men who were going to represent “le pays en Egypte”.⁹⁵ If the official message from the Queen’s representative could not explain the situation within the framework of a single national narrative, it seemed unlikely that the contingent could provide a unitary representation of Canada on the Nile.

Attitudes expressed towards the recruitment and departure of the voyageurs reveal an ongoing struggle by anglophone Canadians to win recogni-

94 Quebec *Morning Chronicle*, September 16, 1884; Stacey, ed., *The Nile Voyageurs*, pp. 76–79.

95 Henri Têtu, *Le R. P. Bouchard, Missionnaire Apostolique* (Québec: Pruneau & Kirouac, 1897), p. 125.

tion from Britain as an important part of the Empire. These efforts were complicated by the blurring of categories between Native and settler in Wolseley's request for Indians from Canada and the occasional tendency of Britons to say "Canadian" when they meant "Indian". Anglophone Canadians expressed anxiety that their country, if remembered at all, was imagined by Britons to be an ice-covered frontier populated by Indians. Could such non-Canadians represent Canada? Specialized language helped to maintain distinctions between "Canadian and Indian", although, as the contingent assembled, such stereotypes were challenged by experience: Native men wanted to work not fight; they were not without emotion; they were impressive orators; and, far from having declined in prowess, they appeared both fit and hardy. The boundary between "Canadian and Indian", which was crucial to anglophone Canadian identity, would prove easier to maintain at home than on an imperial campaign in Africa.

Being Canadian and Indian on the Nile

Once the men left Canadian shores, press coverage became more sporadic, dependent as it was upon official military news cables, reprinted articles by British war correspondents, and occasional letters from voyageurs themselves. Canadian impressions of the voyageurs as national representatives abroad were based on these sources. Media coverage of the men's work on the Nile, their voyage back to Canada, and their return to their homes can be examined in three thematic categories: sensitivity to praise or criticism of the voyageurs from the British media; acknowledgement that the "Indians" were considered the best voyageurs; and British imprecision with distinctions between "Canadian and Indian".

"Some of the English press men are running us down"

Canadian officials, officers, and newspapers all demonstrated a sensitivity to British impressions of Canadians, complimentary or not. From the outset, the men were criticized for frequent drunkenness and "scenes of disorder".⁹⁶ After disruptions in Sydney, Cape Breton, and Gibraltar, several men were fined, and Dr. Neilson gave them a stern lecture on temperance. He appealed to their national honour, saying that their drunkenness "exposes to dishonor and ridicule the name of Canadian". The men swore an oath to abstain from drink while in Egypt and the Sudan.⁹⁷ After their arrival in Alexandria, the voyageurs were carried by rail and steamer through Egypt to the Sudanese border, and, after a considerable delay at Wadi Halfa, they began their river work in late October.

The Nile expedition used modified "whaler boats" which were rowed or sailed on flat stretches of water and guided up through cataracts with tracking

⁹⁶ Winnipeg *Sun*, September 22, 1884.

⁹⁷ Winnipeg *Sun*, November 4, 1884.

lines, poles, and the rowing power of British soldiers. In most cases, one voyageur would be placed in the bow and another in the stern to pilot the boat up through the rapids, directing the men on ropes and oar. After some experimentation, a “fixed station” system was set up in which gangs of voyageurs each established a camp at the base of one cataract along the route. While some men expressed disappointment that they were limited to one area, ferrying an ascending column of soldiers southwards, for most of the men this arrangement approximated familiar working conditions in Canada, with fixed hours, a regular camp, and the opportunity to become acquainted with one particular stretch of the river.

Conflict was frequently reported between the voyageurs and junior British officers whose troops were manning the boats. The *Morning Post* said that the Canadian voyageurs were “insubordinate, often flatly refusing to obey the officials in command and are threatening to become a serious hindrance to the progress of the expedition”.⁹⁸ Later some voyageurs complained “bitterly of the arrogant manner in which they were treated by the British officers in command” and the “air of authority assumed by the English officers in charge”. One voyageur asked *Globe* readers to “imagine a boy three months from school giving orders to Canadians and interfering with a boatman who thoroughly understands his business.” He raised these issues, he said, “for I see some of the English press men are running us down”.⁹⁹ Voyageur correspondents insisted they were not complaining, but British newspapers claimed Canadians criticized the food, military discipline, the “unsuitable” boats, or the Nile itself as “a dirty job”.¹⁰⁰ Following such comments during the period the men were working on the river, there were also widespread reports that they had “become obstreperous again” on the homeward journey, becoming “intractable” and “insubordinate”, even “getting up a mutiny”.¹⁰¹ One Torontonion, with the penname “Canadian”, thought the conduct of many voyageurs was “not above reproach”. He noted that “non-military men often call by the name of arrogance that which often is but strict military discipline.”¹⁰² No doubt, much of the apparent conflict was indeed between different cultural norms of working-class shantymen and those of the British army.

The Canadian press was quick to reprint compliments from commanders or the English correspondents. The voyageurs won “great credit” from the army for their “systematic and untiring ... labors” and certain officers said it would have been better to have “1,200 Canadian boatmen engaged instead of 400”.¹⁰³ Such brief compliments, based on telegrams, were frequently

98 *Winnipeg Daily Times*, October 20, 1884.

99 *Toronto Globe*, January 27, 1885.

100 *Winnipeg Sun*, December 4, 1884, c.f. London [England] *Standard*, November 13, 1884.

101 *Winnipeg Sun*, February 20 and 21, 1885.

102 Letter to editor, *Toronto Globe*, March 12, 1885.

103 *Winnipeg Sun*, November 21, 1884. This item was widely published.

reprinted. The *Sun* published a glowing excerpt from the *Standard* in which an English reporter described the voyageurs' strong, coarse language, rich with the "adjectives and expressions" of "American backwoods and Canadian lumber rafts".

Yet here are the names of our five Canadians: James Graham, foreman, as complete a Scotchman in type, and cautious disposition, although not assuredly in tongue, as ever the Land of Cakes itself produced. Anthony Milks, a handsome Anglo-Saxon, with soft blue eyes and brown hair, of the true old Viking stock. Robert Simpson, another Scotchman in descent; and William McNair and James Elliott, although they never saw Ireland, as evident sons of Erin, in appearance and manner as may be found between Dublin and Cork.

These "Americo-Britons", who were all of "magnificent physique", he held up "as specimens of the best of our race" and just as good as the "Frenchmen and Indians".¹⁰⁴ Here was the type of recognition many British North Americans sought from the British: respect for both their Britishness and their distinctive North American qualities. Such pieces were atypical, however.

While some shantymen were criticized for drunkenness or indiscipline, they were generally considered to be strong, skilled workers. Some were charged, however, with outright incompetence. Several British officers published articles claiming that a number of the Canadians "were not voyageurs at all" but clerks, bankers, and lawyers. One officer described his misfortune at being assigned such men who "ran my boats on every rock they could manage; made me track mile after mile of rapid which I afterwards found Indians and voyageurs sailed and rowed through."¹⁰⁵ Melgund and Lansdowne rushed to the defence of the Canadians, claiming that only 26 men were inefficient.¹⁰⁶ The public debate had shifted to the contingent's degree of incompetence.

Negative reports were often printed without comment, but in some instances the sense of public ambivalence towards the voyageurs was palpable. One *Ottawa Citizen* editorial called for a "large turnout" for the voyageurs' homecoming parade. It felt compelled the following day to rebuke those trying "to throw cold water on the movement for giving the voyageurs a cordial reception". The paper insisted "they will be cordially greeted. If it was the proper thing to give them a good 'send off' on their departure, why should they not be the recipients of some attention on their return home?"¹⁰⁷ The festivities were, for some at least, more a question of duty than genuine enthusiasm.

104 *Winnipeg Sun*, December 29, 1884.

105 *Montreal Star*, March 10, 1885.

106 *Winnipeg Sun*, March 10, 1885.

107 *Ottawa Citizen*, March 6, 1885.

“At least the Indians acquitted themselves in a creditable manner”

None of the warnings of Canadian politicians and lumber barons regarding the inadequacy of Aboriginal boatmen was echoed by English officers or reporters on the Nile. One voyageur wrote that member of the Canadian contingent were “objects of great interest ... the Indian element in particular”.¹⁰⁸ A correspondent from the *Standard* wrote, “[T]he sight of the North American Indians thus navigating British troops up the cataracts of the Nile is one of the most singular ever witnessed in a campaign.”¹⁰⁹ One voyageur noted, “[T]he British officers to a certain extent treated the voyageurs in the same manner as jockeys, and their special favorites were the Indians.”¹¹⁰ For officers in Wolseley’s “ring”, meeting the voyageurs was somewhat of a reunion with Red River veterans. Col. Alleyne chose to command Louis Jackson’s Kahnawake gang, and Col. Butler took with him Chief Prince and the men from St. Peter’s. In *The Campaign of the Cataracts*, Butler’s description of the Saulteaux refers not to their technical skills, but to their exotic qualities. Prince and his men sat “in old Indian fashion, cross-legged on the ground”, and soon felt “at home in this strange land” when Butler produced whisky and tobacco, the “keys to unlock the tongue of a Redman”.¹¹¹ Butler’s book, which was one of the most popular and widely read accounts of the expedition, gave prominence to First Nations boatmen all out of proportion to their numbers. While he repeated many of the same themes from *The Great Lone Land*, the Nile expedition gave Butler particular satisfaction to the extent that the ethnically diverse campaign manifested the loyalty of the Empire’s many subject peoples. Describing the ascent of one cataract, Butler praised the manner in which men from “the four quarters of the world” pulled together and “vanquished the Nile at Dal”. The “great brotherhood” made up of “red man and black, yellow, brown and white” demonstrated “how keenly the scattered children of the earth will join hands” (under British command).¹¹² Skills were certainly important to Butler, but he derived a certain satisfaction from having a skilled Saulteaux pilot in his boat that would have been hard to duplicate with an equally skilled British-Canadian pilot.

Yet it would be a mistake to reduce all compliments directed towards the Aboriginal boatmen to British imperial fantasies. Their skills and abilities were not the construction of ideology, but the product of years of work. The most elaborate descriptions of the First Nations and Métis voyageurs in the British press focused on their river work, not the exotic qualities that preoc-

108 *Winnipeg Daily Times*, November 21, 1884.

109 James Grant, *Cassell’s History of the War in the Soudan* (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1885), vol III, pp. 33–34.

110 Charles L. Shaw, “Random Reminiscences of a Nile Voyageur”, *Toronto Saturday Night*, December 23, 1893.

111 William Francis Butler, *The Campaign of the Cataracts: Being a Personal Narrative of the Great Nile Expedition of 1884–5* (London: S. Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1887, 2nd ed.), pp. 143–144.

112 *Ibid.*, pp. 190–191.

cupied Butler. In a *Globe* interview, Mr. J. M. Cook, of the famous tourist company, praised the skills of the Canadian voyageurs, noting that, although he had sworn never to travel the cataracts in a boat, when he saw Jackson, “the chief foreman of the Canadians”, he felt he had “nothing to fear”. Describing the descent, as Jackson passed through treacherous stretches without touching a rock, Cook said that an Egyptian pilot in the boat, who had sailed up and down it all his life, “expressed to us his utter astonishment at the way in which these Canadians, who had never seen the river before, and who knew nothing of the difficulties of the work, managed their boats, and invariably took the right course”.¹¹³ Jackson was amused at the “surprise to the Egyptian soldiers” whenever his gang shot a rapid. “The natives came rushing out of their huts with their children, goats and dogs and stood on the beach to see the North American Indian boatmen.”¹¹⁴ A British correspondent, describing the Mohawk descent of the cataract at Dal in “Canadian style”, said, “[T]he effect produced on natives and Egyptians by the display was most excellent.” Watching “them rush into the boil of the Ambigol cataract ... rowing harder and harder, as if the current itself were not carrying them quick enough to apparent destruction”, a Sudanese boatman cried “with bated breath that ‘God was great’ ”.¹¹⁵

Criticisms were at times directed towards boatmen from Winnipeg, Ottawa, and Trois-Rivières, but none were made against those from St. Peter’s or Kahnawake.¹¹⁶ The War Office’s final report on the Nile Voyageur contingent said that all but 45 did work that was “admirable”, whereas Jackson’s gang was “excellent”. It refrained from ranking the different gangs, but stated that “the Indians were best adapted to working the many rapids” and proved invaluable.¹¹⁷ In the eyes of British officers, Egyptians, Canadian commanding officer Lt.-Col. Frederick Denison, and even other voyageurs, the gangs from Kahnawake and St. Peter’s were clearly the most skilled boatmen. After the expedition, the *Montreal Star* acknowledged, “[N]o matter what is said about the Canadian contingent as a whole, the general opinion seems to be that the Indians acquitted themselves in a manner highly creditable to themselves and gave every satisfaction by their performance.”¹¹⁸ The insistence that they were a credit to “themselves”, as opposed to Canada, was a distinction missed by many Britons.

113 *Toronto Globe*, January 27, 1885.

114 Louis Jackson, *Our Caughnawagas in Egypt: a narrative of what was seen and accomplished by the contingent of North American Indian voyageurs who led the British boat expedition for the relief of Khartoum up the cataracts of the Nile* (Montreal: W. Drysdale, 1885), p. 26.

115 Correspondent of the *London Standard*, reprinted in the *Winnipeg Sun*, December 29, 1884.

116 “Denison to Melgund, 17 October 1884”, in Stacey, ed., *The Nile Voyageurs*, p. 150; Butler, *The Campaign of the Cataracts*, p. 143.

117 “Report of Brigadier-General F. W. Grenfell, 4 July 1885”, in Stacey, ed., *The Nile Voyageurs*, pp. 219–220.

118 *Montreal Star*, March 8, 1885.

“The man took me for an Indian because I was a Canadian”

The British press, as evident in the descriptions of Mohawk whitewater skills, frequently called Aboriginals “Canadians”. If Cook called Jackson “the chief foreman of the Canadians”, might other compliments of “Canadians” have referred to “Indians”? When commanding officers said they could have used more Canadians, they likely meant more Saulteaux and Mohawks like Prince and Jackson, not men like Charles Lewis Shaw, one of the “lawyer voyageurs” recruited in Winnipeg. Originally from Perth, Ontario, and educated at the University of Toronto, Shaw was a junior law clerk in Winnipeg when voyageurs were called up. He jumped at the opportunity to engage, even though he had no practical boating experience. After his return from the Sudan, he practised law in Edmonton and later returned to Winnipeg, where he began a career as a part-time journalist. In a comical story for *Toronto Saturday Night*, Shaw used British confusions between “Canadian and Indian” on the Nile to illustrate the “[prodigious] ignorance displayed by the majority of both officers and men regarding Canada and Canadians”.

In Shaw’s story, Lieutenant B., a young subaltern in charge of his whaler boat, struck up a conversation with Shaw. “By the way, Canadian,” he began, “I’ve noticed you speak English very well. How did you manage it in Canada?” Taken aback, Shaw told Lieut. B. that he “managed to pick it up” through his work as a “guide for English hunting parties”. When the officer asked about the “splendid shooting in Canada”, Shaw described conditions in Toronto and Winnipeg and told him that, when one went to Hamilton mountain, one went “loaded for bear”. The officer noted, “You must have a jolly, strange life, you Canadian Indians.” Shaw’s narrator “gasped for breath. Shades of my ancestors! The man took me for an Indian because I was Canadian.” Instead of correcting Lieut. B., Shaw continued to “play Indian”, describing his life roaming the Rocky Mountains and doing the sun dance in Montreal. When told to “Sing me an Indian song, like a good fellow”, Shaw at first demurred, but then sang the song of his *alma mater* in Greek, which Lieut. B. found impressive. Shaw imagined the “horror of the venerable and learned dons of old Trinity” to hear their “Greek iambic being taken for a Cree war song” echoing in “the Nubian Hills”.¹¹⁹

The brunt of Shaw’s joke was the English subaltern, formally of a higher rank than the civilian boatman from the colonies, yet less educated and worldly. The “horror” felt by Shaw, his ancestors, and his college dons was surpassed only by the depth of the Englishman’s ignorance, for he imagined that Canada was a vast “Great Lone Land” populated by Indians. The narrator felt wounded at this misrepresentation of Canada, but saw no harm in the misrepresentation of “Indians”, who are conveniently absent in the story. Shaw expected the colonial reader to see that he was a lawyer, competently posing as a riverman and able to “play Indian” convincingly. For his anglo-

119 Shaw, “Random Reminiscences of a Nile Voyageur”.

phone Canadian audience, Shaw's comic frisson sprang from the supposedly ridiculous idea that Britons confused "Canadians and Indians". The story is less a document of an actual conversation than an expression of Shaw's Canadian identity *vis-à-vis* Englishness and Aboriginality.

An interesting parallel was reported by K. I. Inglis in his book *The Rehearsal*, a study of the New South Wales military contingent that came to the Red Sea coast of the Sudan after Gordon's death. Australian soldiers were "startled to find some Englishmen so ignorant of their land as to believe that only Aborigines lived there: 'Blimey, Bill; these "Walers" are white blokes!!' " Inglis attributed the shock of the Australian soldiers to the "tender colonial nerve" touched upon "by confusion, earnest or jocular, between black and white".¹²⁰

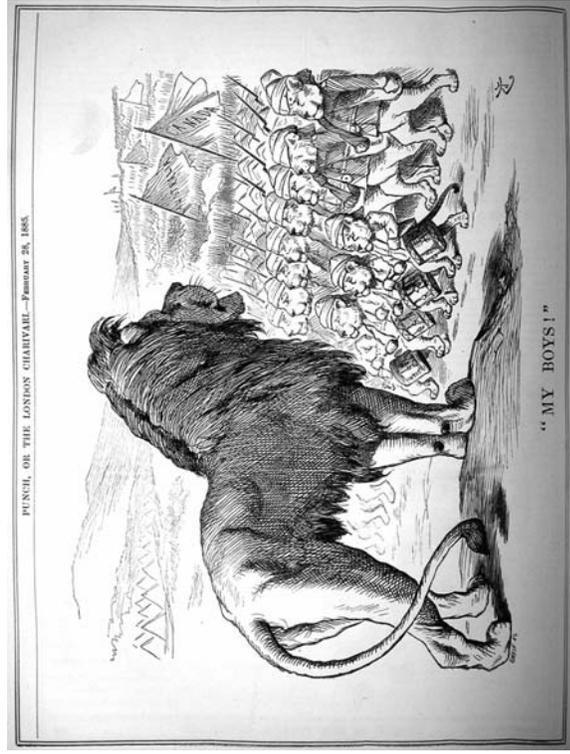
The British tendency to "confuse" the racial categories so important to the identity of settler colonists was graphically evident in a series of cartoons published by *Punch* magazine. By late January 1885, it became clear that Khartoum could not be reached in time to return the voyageurs to their homes by the first week of March, as stipulated in their six-month contracts. Despite an enticement of a 50-per-cent pay increase, only one-fifth of the men volunteered to re-engage. The bulk of the Canadian contingent, including almost all of the Aboriginal boatmen and shantymen, began their descent of the Nile with Gordon's fate still uncertain. In the first week of February, as they were preparing to leave Egypt, the world learned that Khartoum had fallen to the Mahdi and Gordon was dead. The Sudanese situation was front-page news in Canada, and again there were offers of Canadian troops to fight the Mahdi.¹²¹ As Canadian offers of service were publicized in England, the colonies of the British world competed with one another to win the privilege of contributing soldiers to a renewed campaign in the fall.

Punch responded on February 21 with a cartoon entitled "Kith and Kin" (Figure 1), which depicted Britannia gazing with satisfaction upon Miss Canada, outfitted with snowshoes, buckskin, and a rifle.¹²² Canada is offering military aid to Britain, and reference is made to other colonies doing the same. The cartoon was reprinted in *Grip* without comment, but the *Globe*, opposed to military participation in the war, was very critical. Its editorial stated, "Canadians are loyal and patriotic and brave, but they are also a common sense people, who do not love fighting for its own sake." It criticized the representation of Canada, in which Britannia "looks with a smile, in which are blended condescension, surprise, and a little contempt, upon a youth tricked out in the habiliments of an Indian brave, who assures the dignified lady that

120 K. I. Inglis, *The Rehearsal: Australians in the Sudan, 1885* (Sydney, Australia: Kevin Weldon and Associates, 1985), p. 95.

121 *Ottawa Citizen*, March 6, 1885; *Globe*, March 7, 1885.

122 On the topic of "Miss Canada" as represented in *Grip* magazine, which styled itself a Canadian *Punch*, see Christina Burr, "Gender, Sexuality and Nationalism in J. W. Bengough's Verses and Political Cartoons", *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 83, no. 4 (2002), pp. 505-554.



Figures 1 and 2: "Kith and Kin" (February 21, 1885) and "My Boys" (February 28, 1885), published in two consecutive issues of *Punch*, both express a British satisfaction that members of the imperial family wished to avenge Gordon's death. They also demonstrate, in the days immediately following the work of the Nile Voyageurs, the interchangeable nature of Aboriginal and British imagery in the British representations of Canada.

he will stand by her should she be in any difficulty".¹²³ In the next issue, on February 28, *Punch* followed with another cartoon on the same topic, entitled "My Boys" (Figure 2). The *Citizen* described it as "a capital cartoon", "clever in conceptions and admirable in execution", which "represents the British lion standing on an eminence and before him are marching in military array a solid column of lesser lions", representing Canada and Australia.¹²⁴ Contrary opinions were expressed on the desirability of sending Canadian soldiers to the Sudan, but certainly the second cartoon's representation of Canada best reflected the manner in which anglophone Canadians wished to be recognized, as lion-hearted British soldiers, not as "Indian" trappers.

If the British, in their language and their graphic imagery, sometimes failed to make sharp distinctions between "Canadian and Indian", anglophone Canadian colonists strictly maintained this boundary. Denison's final report to the British army classified the contingent in terms of nationality: "77 Indians, 36 English and Scotch, 93 French Canadians, 158 Canadians other than French Canadian and 16 other Nationalities."¹²⁵ Canadian press reports and the voyageurs themselves consistently employed linguistic distinctions. The same was true among Mohawk voyageurs. In Louis Jackson's published memoir, *Our Caughnawagas in Egypt: a narrative of what was seen and accomplished by the contingent of North American Indian voyageurs who led the British boat expedition for the relief of Khartoum up the cataracts of the Nile*, the contingent is a "Caughnawaga" contingent. Jackson never refers to himself or his fellow Mohawks as Canadians, but as "our Caughnawaga Indians", "North American boatmen", "my Caughnawaga boys", or "my Iroquois".¹²⁶ His text assumes that there were two contingents, one Iroquois and one Canadian, with the latter very much in the background. Shaw spoke of the persistent "clannishness of our kind", by which he meant the tendency among the Canadians for regional groups, gangs, and even smaller subgroups to associate exclusively within themselves.¹²⁷ There were many reasons for this, but one was undoubtedly the "fixed station" system of work that scattered the gangs along the length of the Nile, often up to "one hundred miles distant" from each other for weeks at a time.¹²⁸ Since gangs were locally formed upon engagement in Canada, they tended to be internally homoge-

123 *Toronto Globe*, March 9, 1885.

124 *Ottawa Citizen*, March 13, 1885.

125 "General Report, Lt-Col. F. C. Denison to Major-General, Sir Redvers Buller, 9 May 1885", in Stacey, ed., *The Nile Voyageurs*, p. 213. Lt.-Col. Coleridge Grove's "Report on the Canadian Voyageurs" reorganizes Denison's nationality groups as follows: "The 380 foremen and men consisted of 36 English and Scotch, 158 Canadians, 93 French Canadians, 77 Indians, and 16 other nationalities" (p. 215).

126 Jackson, *Our Caughnawagas in Egypt*, pp. 14, 26, 30, 33.

127 Charles Lewis Shaw, "Captain Robinson and the Nile Expedition", *Winnipeg Tribune*, September 15, 1905.

128 LAC RG10 Indian Affairs, vol. 6829, file 503-4-1, reel C-8547, Neilson to Denison, January 21, 1894.

neous in terms of language, ethnicity, class, and region. Such conditions did not lend themselves to formation of group cohesion, let alone assimilation or formation of national identity.¹²⁹ The categorical separation between “Canadian and Indian” was largely maintained by those from Canada even as they were regularly confronted with British transgressions of this boundary of racial identity.

Homecomings

As the voyageurs were steaming home, the War Office announced that it would not be accepting Canadian offers of troops. Such an outcome was by no means a foregone conclusion to the public at the time. A military contingent from New South Wales was given permission to proceed to the Red Sea, and it did not appear inconceivable that Canadian troops might have joined them, if an autumn campaign had been launched. While many factors affected London’s decision to decline these offers, Canadian newspapers suggested that the Nile Voyageurs bore much of the blame. Because many of the “so-called Canadian voyageurs were not Canadian voyageurs at all”, it was widely believed that military authorities feared “a similar state of things would have occurred” with Canadian soldiers. The crisis was “far too serious to admit of experiments”.¹³⁰

Amidst such discussions, the Nile Voyageurs arrived in Canada in early March, eager to return to their homes where friends and family members awaited them. Boarding various trains in Halifax, the contingent broke off into its constituent groups at different spots along the line. The Trois-Rivières men were greeted by the St-Jean-Baptiste Snowshoe Club with a rousing cheer of “vive la Canadienne!” The group proceeded to city hall where they were given a warm reception, with speeches that emphasized religion rather than imperial duty and evoked memories of returning Zouaves.¹³¹ The return of the Mohawks was noted in the press, again with stories dwelling upon the presence of many women and family members. Their meeting at the train station was “touching in the extreme”. The men “appeared fairly overcome with delight and gave free scope to their emotion, and tears flowed freely”, a circumstance which, in the view of the reporter, was “contrary to the general idea of Indian stoicism”. They “heartily kissed all the women of their tribe” and “exchanged warm embraces with the men”.¹³² The boatmen were welcomed in Kahnawake with a grand feast in a lavishly decorated Exhibition Hall with a procession that included the Six Fusiliers brass band and the Tuque Bleue snowshoe club of Montreal. There were toasts and speeches by community leaders, visitors from the city, and some of the voyageurs.¹³³ The

129 Sheffield, *The Red Man’s on the Warpath*, p. 48.

130 *Winnipeg Sun*, February 19, 1885.

131 *Montreal Star*, March 9, 1885; *L’Ère nouvelle de Trois-Rivières*, March 10, 1885.

132 *Montreal Star*, March 6, 1885.

133 *Montreal Star*, March 9, 1885.

largest reception was in Ottawa, where on March 7 it seemed that “half the population of the city” was on the streets to give “three hearty British cheers” as the train pulled in. The Frontenac Snowshoe club lined the platform, illuminating it with burning calcium lights. When the men had finished greeting their friends, they formed a procession led by two musical bands and sleighs carrying the reception committee members (all named in the newspaper), followed by “the voyageurs, on foot”, the Hull Band, and the Frontenac Snowshoe Club. After a march through downtown, the men enjoyed a luncheon banquet and listened to speeches by the Mayor, Lord Melgund, and others.¹³⁴

In a sharp contrast, the Manitoba group returned to an empty Winnipeg train station. The men had breakfast at a local hotel and returned to their homes with no public ceremony. These men were interviewed by a *Globe* reporter while travelling on the train. One of the “white” boatmen offered to take the reporter to the second-class compartment to meet “the Indians”. Chief Prince was described as “a powerful-looking man” who “wore an Arab fez, which made him look like the Mahdi himself”.¹³⁵ One suspects Prince’s “race” had as much to do with this description as any other factor, since newspaper illustrations always depicted the Mahdi in a turban. The figure most commonly shown with a Turkish fez in this period was Gordon. This imagery took on a new potency with the outbreak of the Northwest rebellion. Just two weeks after this article was published, the Prime Minister said in the House of Commons that Louis Riel had convinced the Métis that “he was a sort of El Mahdi”.¹³⁶ Many of the Canadian militiamen who had been disappointed in February to learn that they would not be able to fight the Mahdi’s rebellion rushed to the Northwest in March to fight Riel’s rebellion. Several “white” Nile Voyageurs were among their numbers. How could *Punch*’s armed Native accurately represent Canada in the aftermath of the Northwest rebellion? If there was any possibility of the Nile Voyageurs representing a unified Canada that included “Indians”, it was vastly overpowered by this conflict that divided anglophones from francophones and European Canadians from Aboriginal peoples.

In the months after their return, the voyageurs were publicly thanked for their services by General Wolseley, the Queen, and the British Parliament. Medals were eventually delivered to the men by the agents who enlisted them, and in some cases they were simply sent out in the mail. None were distributed ceremonially. In public memory, the expedition seemed to have left little lasting impression, winning no commemoration in statues, works of memorable Canadian fiction, history texts, or school books.

134 *Ottawa Citizen*, March 8, 1885.

135 *Toronto Globe*, March 9, 1885.

136 Hon. John A. Macdonald, *Official report of the debates of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada* (Ottawa: MacLean, Roger, 1885), March 26, 1885, p. 764.

Conclusion

The despatching of the Nile Voyageur contingent provides a rich case study of early post-Confederation identities among anglophone Canadians. Canada's involvement generated anglophone Canadian texts that explicitly reflected upon Canada's place in the empire and its relations with Aboriginal peoples.

At the most basic level, popular imperial enthusiasm was expressed at the idea of a Canadian contingent. Public critics of the expedition existed from the outset, but there was a broad consensus that some sort of Canadian participation in the campaign was desirable. A British identity was clearly expressed with an imperial discourse in editorials, in interviews with the voyageurs, and in descriptions of departure ceremonies. From the outset, it was assumed that the Nile Voyageurs would represent Canada and, it was hoped, win for the colony Britain's gratitude. For this reason, some expressed disappointment that Canada's contribution was civilian rather than military. Behind this disappointment lay fears that the British considered Canadians valuable only as "pack mules" and servants. Whether or not hopes for a Canadian military contribution were realistic, the desire for such representation was repeatedly vocalized, at the start of the Nile Expedition and again after Gordon's death. Enthusiasm was tempered by the civilian nature of the contingent, supposed slights to Canadian hardiness, frustrations with British stereotypes of Canada as a frozen frontier, and later embarrassing reports of insubordination, but in the end the European-Canadian voyageurs were, with some notable exceptions, portrayed as having successfully completed the task for which they were hired, and therefore as having well represented the country in its first imperial campaign.

Aboriginal boatmen, however, were not publicly perceived to be representatives of the country. Their recruitment and participation were initially seen as a curious and interesting side-story. In all written sources from anglophone Canada, there was a consistent distinction between "Canadian and Indian", reflecting both a legal and cultural reality that Natives, whether idealized as "noble savages" or considered "degenerate" and "disappearing", were incompatible with the "civilization" of the British colonial state. By their very presence, the Aboriginal boatmen disproved claims that they had become "all but extinct" in the railway age. Yet the tropes of distinction, behavioural stereotypes, and an exotic vocabulary proved remarkably resilient. As the contingent gathered to depart, reporters considered such a "mixture" of "Canadians and Indians" to be a social novelty. To anglophone observers, Aboriginal men joined the Canadian contingent.

But these racial and cultural boundaries were transgressed and sometimes inverted by the British during the Nile Expedition. In British newspaper reports, in statements of prominent individuals like Cook, and in popular books such as *Cassell's History of the War in the Soudan*, Britons called Aboriginal boatmen "Indians", "Canadians", or "Canadian Indians", displaying little concern for the precision of colonial race distinctions. From Wolse-

ley's understanding of "voyageur" as "Indian", to *Punch* comics that haphazardly alternated between Anglo-Saxon and Aboriginal depictions of Canada, the events of the expedition frequently revealed to Canadians the persistent British tendency to misrepresent the colony as an "Indian" frontier. C. L. Shaw's fiction amplified the tensions associated with such misrepresentation for comical purposes.

When distinctions were made between Aboriginal boatmen and European Canadians, the British regularly stated a preference for the former. Wolsley's stated preference for "Indians" at the outset was ultimately confirmed by observers on the Nile. It was clear that the best boatmen were recruited from reserves at Kahnawake and St. Peter's, the same men whom the "most competent authorities" tried to dissuade the Governor General from selecting. The nation from which anglophone Canadians most desired to win recognition seemed, in this situation, to place higher value on the achievements and qualities of the same Aboriginals who were not understood by colonials to be "Canadian". Consequently, Native boatmen were praised as a credit "to themselves" or to their "race", but not to Canada.

An important dimension of an emerging "national" identity among anglophone Canadians in the mid-1880s was a sharp cultural distinction between "Canadian and Indian" and an accompanying assumption of Native inferiority. When such distinctions were overlooked or even inverted by the British, the resulting tensions helped to foster a public ambivalence towards this rough and "heterogeneous conglomeration of human elements" known as the Nile Voyageurs. Colonial anxieties towards such national representatives help us understand why this curious episode quickly faded from public memory.