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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Charges Against Laird Rebutted

By NEIL A. MATHESON

MY THANKS GO this week to Guy E. Rollings of North Rustico for an interesting clipping from the Edmonton Journal.

David Laird Mathieson, a former Charlottetown man who lives now in Edmonton, writes an interesting rebuttal to charges made against three leaders of the last century including his grandfather David Laird. The charges are made in "The Unjust Society" written by Harold Cardinal, on "the tragedy of Canada's Indians".

Mr. Mathieson agrees with Cardinal that until Canada honors the existing treaties, Indians should not surrender their existing rights in substitution for a proposed new government policy. He has no doubt, he writes, that the treaties have been dishonoured in some important respects.

"But to say they were prepared with 'fraudulent intent and signed by dishonourable men' is unjust and untrue", Mr. Mathieson contends.

One chapter of Cardinal's book headed "The Great Swindle" says "the white man took what we gave him and more, but we never received payment. It was planned that way.

"The truth of the matter is that Canadian Indians got swindled. Our forefathers", Cardinal writes, "got taken by slick-talking, fork-tongues cheats . . ."

Tribes Were Powerful

BACK IN 1877 Mr. Mathieson writes, the Canada Government named a commission to enter into Treaty No. 7 with the Blackfoot, the Piegans, the Bloods, the Sarcees and the Stoneys. At the time they probably constituted the most powerful, disciplined and well-organized confederacy of Indian tribes on the American continent. Only the year before the Sioux had wiped out General Custer and his army, only a few miles away, across the border.

Like the Sioux, the Canadian Indians could put in the field the best cavalry in the world, notes Mr. Mathieson and this will come as a surprise to many Guardian readers.

"The chief of the Blackfoot confederacy was Crowfoot, an outstanding man in any society, of the highest integrity and intelligence. He was described as a 'handsome and striking figure', then in the prime of life and he bore himself with all the dignity of his race and the authority that was his".

Laird And MacLeod

THE COMMISSION appointed to negotiate a treaty with these formidable people were David Laird, Lieutenant-Governor of the Northwest Territories, and Lt.-Col. James F. MacLeod.

MacLeod was the commander of the Northwest Mounted Police and had come to the Blackfoot country in 1873.

What the Indians of the time thought of Macleod in those times was told by Frank Oliver who wrote after hearing the Indians engage in treaty negotiations at Blackfoot Crossing.

“I heard Red Crow, chief of the South Bloods, say:

“If Stamixotoken (MacLeod) says it will be done I will take his word” and the sentiment was vocally approved by every Chief present.

Mr. Mathieson notes that Mr. MacLeod lived at Fort MacLeod and Calgary after his retirement as a magistrate and judge. “His name was and is a household word in Alberta among both Indians and whites”, he writes.

But it's the name of David Laird, the Lieutenant-Governor of The Territories as they were known, that's of more interest to Island readers.

Quoting his grandson, David Laird Mathieson:

David Laird was not a stranger to Western Indians and their problems. As minister of the interior in the federal cabinet he had journeyed west in 1874, and with Lieutenant Governor Morris of Manitoba had entered into the Qu'Appelle Treaty No. 4.

Mr. Mathieson's reference to further confrontations between Laird and the Indians includes this one:

Incident Recalled

“THE BUFFALO disappeared even sooner than anticipated. The Indians were hungry and bewildered and some of their young men were angry. At various times in the next four years they came in thousands to Battleford, then the capital of the Territories and camped about government house. There were many conferences with the governor, sometimes called the Big Chief (he was six feet, five inches in height).

“It was a difficult situation as there was little enough food for the small settlement. Cattle were grazing about the building, yet as Mr. Laird said later about the Indians ‘They did not touch a hoof, take food or anything else. They behaved most nobly.’”

Continuing Mr. Mathieson says:

“Mr. Laird had a great admiration for those people, and their strict code of honor. He sought to know and understand them. He made it a practice to entertain visiting chiefs and leading Metis (including Gabriel Dumont) at his dinner table. His young children were allowed to run about their encampments.”

All this was strange conduct, notes Mr. Mathieson, if he (Laird) had been guilty of the deliberate fraud now charged.

Tribute To Laird

ON THEIR PART the Indians of those days called Laird “The man whose tongue is not forked”. As one chief put it then, “You never gave us all that we ask, but you always gave us all you promised”.

A more cynical white politician had said of Laird: “He was so upright as to be impractical”.

When Laird's term of office as Lieutenant-Governor expired in 1881 he returned home to P.E.I. but in 1899 he was named an Indian commissioner by the Laurier government and with other commissioners he negotiated Treaty No. 8 with the Crees, Chipewyans and other tribes occupying the vast area north of Edmonton, then known as Athabaska.

Rev. Father Lacombe, OMI, was named to the Commission in an advisory capacity. Mr. Mathieson gives evidence as to this man's reliability then observes:

"These three men, Laird, MacLeod and Lacombe are among those called Slick-talking, fork-tongued cheats."

A Great Shame

"IT'S A GREAT shame" the former Charlottetown lawyer writes, "that such men, honored in their generation, should be so maligned."

"Assuming that the promises they made have been dishonored by their successors, how can they be blamed.

"It is a pity that Mr. Cardinal had over-stated his case in this regard" adds Mr. Mathieson, "for he expresses very well the tragic story of his people.

"He (Cardinal) wields a sharp tomahawk against many living officials and ministers of the crown. Let them defend themselves. It is to be hoped, however, that in his rage against 'the unjust society' some of his statements will not too deeply offend those many white Canadians who would like to assist his cause."

Most Canadians are woefully ignorant, Mr. Mathieson observes, of many of the details of former years, and charges the main reason "Is that much of our written history is to be found only in bits and pieces; in old books out of print; on limited biographical sketches; in magazines and newspaper articles; in correspondence; all of which should be in our libraries."

Much of the history to which Mr. Mathieson refers, was passed down by stories told by one generation to another. These should have been recorded, but in many cases they have not been.

"This lack of information," the Edmonton lawyer observes, "is not Mr. Cardinal's fault, it is ours."

I have often found that "lack of printed information" of which Mr. Mathieson complains, as I sometimes searched for specific details while researching some of my columns.

Mr. Cardinal is president of the Alberta Indian Association.