



ABORIGINAL FIGURES IN CANADIAN HISTORY

An Introduction

Aboriginal people have played a critical role in shaping Canadian history, Canadian culture and life. Even as mainstream culture threatened a traditional way of life, many First Nations, Métis and Inuit individuals defied every barrier to break through with remarkable contributions.

The figures in this chapter have been selected from hundreds of significant individuals, just to offer a small sampling of the often overlooked accomplishments of these great Canadians.

The first part of the chapter treats four Aboriginal figures who loom large in shaping Canadian history before the 20th century: Joseph Brant (Thayendanega), Tecumseh, Big Bear (Mistahimaskwa) and Louis Riel. Each figure is profiled with a special emphasis given to the historic significance of their actions.

The second part of the chapter reviews Aboriginal contributions to three areas of Canadian life: sports, the military, and the arts.





FOUR IMPORTANT ABORIGINAL FIGURES IN CANADIAN HISTORY

Joseph Brant, or Thayendanege (1742 - 1807)

He was regarded as the most important native figure in the era of the American Revolutionary War. He was active in the war: commissioned as a British officer, he led a mostly native army of 400 on numerous raiding parties against the American colonials.

He was commissioned as a British officer. He met with George Washington on several occasions. King George III personally gave him the Masonic apron. On meeting King George III, Brant said: “I bow to no man for I am considered a prince among my people. But I will gladly shake your hand.”

Known primarily for his efforts in wartime, Brant nonetheless committed himself to another goal: uniting the numerous native bands into a pan-Aboriginal alliance that could withstand U.S. expansion, particularly in the Northwest territory. His ultimate goal was to guide Aboriginal people to acknowledging the transformed conditions that were necessary for their survival. He was never completely successful in that goal, but it became an ongoing effort and in the next generation, that effort would be taken up by other leaders, particularly Tecumseh.

He converted to the Anglican church and translated the Gospel of Mark into Mohawk. He built the first Protestant church in Canada: St. Paul’s, Her Majesty’s Chapel of the Mohawks, which is commemorated today in Brantford, Ontario.

He founded the Six Nations reserve on the Grand River in Ontario, today the largest Aboriginal reserve in Canada. For the last two decades of his life, Brant worked as a negotiator for the Six Nations, struggling to ensure that the Canadian government did not encroach on the reserve. Brant argued that native lands did not belong to specific tribes but to all native peoples, and only through native alliances could land be sold or ceded to either American or Canadian governments.

Today most historians recognize Brant as a tireless and visionary leader who struggled to unite native peoples as a means of surviving the impact of expansionist colonials and their young government. Yet during his lifetime, Brant suffered the scourge of a reputation based on the way his army fought some of its battles, even though Brant was not present and did not condone many of their actions. Called Monster Brant throughout the colonies, his reputation is said to have soured Aboriginal-American relations for another two or three generations.

The words from his deathbed testify to Brant’s ongoing commitment to his people. “Have pity on the poor Indians. If you have any influence with the great, endeavour to use it for their good.”

Tecumseh (1768 - 1813)

Because he kept the War of 1812 from expanding into Canada, the Shawnee leader Tecumseh has made the ranks of many lists of Most Famous Canadians. His statue stands among the founders of Confederation in Ottawa.



Tecumseh's driving ambition was akin to the great dream of Joseph Brant: to rally the numerous tribes of North American Indians into a single alliance that could stand against the governments of America and Canada.

Though he was born Shawnee, Tecumseh's true following was a league of native people, drawn from numerous tribes. Tecumseh did not create the following: it began as a kind of native-born religious revival, sparked by Tecumseh's younger brother Tenskwatawa, also known as the Prophet.

In 1808, the brothers established the village of Prophetstown near the Tippecanoe River in what is today Battle Ground, Indiana. When the governor of the newly formed Indiana Territory, William Henry Harrison, negotiated the Treaty of Fort Wayne, Tecumseh emerged as the major opponent to the treaty. Tecumseh was alarmed at the massive land grab by Harrison: some 12,000 square kilometres. And although the land was not Shawnee land as such, Tecumseh traveled widely and urged other native bands to join the resistance at Prophetstown, also known as Tippecanoe.

Tecumseh met with Harrison, searching for a non-violent solution. Harrison waited for Tecumseh to travel south and while he was away, led an army of one thousand men on an expedition to intimidate the Prophet and his followers. The battle went to Harrison's better equipped army. The Indians fled and Harrison's army burned down Prophetstown.

Tecumseh returned to draw together those who wished to fight, and this was the beginning of what became known as "Tecumseh's War" - effectively, a British alliance in their conflict with the Americans in the War of 1812.

In one brilliant maneuver against Major-General Sir Isaac Brock in Detroit, Tecumseh had his few warriors parade and strut in ways suggesting a much larger force. The fort commander General William Hull surrendered.

In October, 1813, Harrison crossed into Upper Canada and decimated enough of Tecumseh's alliance that the remaining tribes of the confederacy surrendered. Tecumseh was killed in the conflict. His body was never found.

Because his confederacy helped withstand and rout the northern movement of American forces during the war, Canadians have long regarded Tecumseh as a major reason Canada did not fall to the Americans in the War of 1812.

In a CBC listing of the 100 greatest Canadians of all time, Tecumseh ranks 38th. The descriptor on the website states: Like an early Martin Luther King, the Shawnee chief had a dream: a dream of a pan-Indian movement and enough land to guarantee his people's way of life. His support of Brock's attack on Detroit ensured Brock's victory, but ultimately, did not further his own.

Big Bear, or Mistahimaskwa (1825 - 1888)

It tells us something about the transformed historic conditions that the two most important Aboriginal figures from the 19th century - Big Bear and Louis Riel -- would rise from conflict with



the Canadian government, whereas the two earlier figures - Joseph Brant and Tecumseh - rose from their wartime efforts that are believed to have aided the Canadian government.

Yet the actions of Bear Bear and Louis Riel were driven by the same goals that drove Joseph Brant and Tecumseh: to unite their peoples in a non-violent confederation that could negotiate as a confederation with the American or Canadian governments.

In particular, Big Bear wanted the recently announced reserve system to work on behalf of Indians. His idea was to construct reserves so they adjoined one another in a manner that would create an Indian nation distinct from, and bordering on, the Canadian nation.

Big Bear was born in the Canadian Northwest - the Plains of Manitoba and Saskatchewan - as a Cree about 1825. He became the Chief of the Plains Cree First Nation. He began organizing and speaking to other nations when he opposed the Canadian government over Treaty 6, one of the numbered treaties of that era, because it did not allow reserves to be settled where the bands wished them to be.

“We want none of the Queen’s presents!” he is quoted as saying. “When we set a fox trap, we scatter pieces of meat all around but when the fox gets into the trap we knock him on the head. We want no baits! Let your Chiefs come like men and talk to us!”

Historians contend that Big Bear was accurate. Previous treaties had stated that the natives could take reserve land wherever they wished. But the Canadian government of that era was the same government that had initiated the first and second Indian Acts and launched such dark initiatives as residential schools.

The conflict was settled not by the actions of either side but by the rapid depletion of the buffalo herds in the 1860s and early 1870s. Big Bear’s Cree people were starving. Big Bear relented and signed Treaty 6.

Big Bear was not a major player in the Métis rebellion of 1885, but some of Big Bear’s warriors - led by another Cree warrior, Wandering Spirit - killed nine men in what was called the Frog Lake Massacre. Big Bear had tried to prevent the killings and expressed regret over them. “It is not my doing, and the young men won’t listen, and I am very sorry for what has been done.”

However, the government used the Frog Lake incident to justify the massive troop contingent - six thousand strong - they sent to the tiny settlement of Batoche, Saskatchewan, where they rapidly defeated the rebellion forces of Louis Riel.

In 1885, Big Bear stood trial for his “part” in the Métis rebellion. He pleaded that he had tried to forestall the actions of the younger warriors. The jury brought in a vote of guilty, with a recommendation for mercy. He was given a three year sentence at Stony Mountain Penitentiary. He made one last speech to the court: “Many of my band are hiding in the woods, paralyzed with terror... I plead again to you, the chiefs of the white man’s laws, for pity and help to the outcasts of my band!”

Big Bear’s health was failing and he was released from prison before the full three years had been completed. He died in 1888. He was the last of the great chiefs who struggled to unite Indian bands into a confederacy or alliance that could stand up to the Canadian government.



Many historians believe that had the young Cree warriors under his charge not acted so violently in the Frog Leg incident, Big Bear's legacy might have been considerably different; he might have achieved the alliance he had struggled to achieve.

Louis Riel (1844 - 1885)

Clearly the best-known historical figure in Aboriginal Canada, Louis Riel was a politician who helped found the province of Manitoba and a leader of the Métis people of the prairies who struggled to ensure the Canadian government acknowledged the rights and culture of the Métis people as the country moved westward. Riel led two rebellions and was hanged by the Canadian government for his role in the second rebellion. His legacy has become identical with the aspirations of Métis people in Canada, who still await the recognition and legitimacy that Riel sought.

Born near Winnipeg to a French-speaking Métis family, Riel was the eldest of 11 children. In his teen years he aspired to the priesthood and proved a scholarly and attentive seminarian in Montreal, until his father's death in 1884. He left the seminary, worked in Montreal, then Chicago, and eventually returned to his origins, and became a leader by challenging a survey that would dispossess numerous Métis settlers from their lands.

The Red River Rebellion of 1869 -1870 enabled Riel to seize control of the young territory and establish a provisional government. Riel continued to negotiate with Ottawa over the founding of the new government, which would become recognized as the province of Manitoba. More than any other figure, Riel became recognized as "the Father of Manitoba."

However, in the course of the resistance, Riel agreed to the execution of one of the leaders of the resistance to the provisional government, Thomas Scott. Scott was executed by a firing squad on March 4th, 1870. The killing of Scott would shadow Riel. He was regarded by the government as the murderer of Scott, and forced to become a fugitive.

During his fugitive years, Riel retired to Montana with a wife he married in 1881. With her, he fathered three children. He became a naturalized American citizen and was involved with the Republican party. Yet during these years while he was a fugitive, Riel was elected three times to the Canadian House of Commons in Ottawa, although he never once took his seat there.

In 1883, the situation for the most of plains Métis had become desperate. The buffalo herds had been demolished by the effects of railroads - British and European visitors paid a high price to shoot away to their heart's content from inside railway cars - and the government's treaty promises to feed the Métis were being ignored. The Métis needed to switch from trapping and hunting to agriculture, but the government refused most land claims. The Métis gathered in early 1884 and sent a delegation to Montana to persuade Riel to return. The delegation was led by Gabriel Dumont, who became the other name attached to the Rebellion of 1885.

Riel returned to Canada, this time to the village of Batoche, in Saskatchewan. He intended to represent the grievances of the Plains Métis to the federal government. Early forms of resistance



escalated into a military showdown. Riel felt confident he could fight Canadian troops one day and negotiate with Ottawa the next. This had worked for him in the first rebellion, fifteen years earlier. But the railroads changed that, and the first Canadian troops arrived in Saskatchewan two weeks after Riel had made his demands.

The outcome of the Battle of Batoche, fought between May 9th and May 12th, 1885, was never in doubt. Riel surrendered on May 15th.

Riel was tried for treason in Regina two months later. He was sentenced to hanging and was executed by that means on November 16th, 1885. A juror at the trial later said, Riel was convicted for treason but hanged for the killing of Thomas Scott.

Riel's legacy was complex and divisive at his death; it continues to be complex and divisive one hundred twenty years after his death.

Arguably, no single event in Canadian history has done more to polarize its English-speaking and its French-speaking citizens than the hanging of Louis Riel. Even in Ottawa, Riel's presence is acutely felt; his statue, somewhat incredibly, stands on Parliament Hill. Two memorial statues of Riel were installed in Winnipeg, one of them - by sculptor Marien Lemay and architect Étienne Gaboury -- depicting Riel as a naked and tortured figure. Yet after much criticism by the Métis community, the Lemay/Gaboury statue was removed to the College universitaire de Saint-Boniface, replaced by the dignified personage of a statesman.

Such controversies and negotiations have continued elsewhere, when Riel's name has been used for streets, schools, even walking trails. Yet popular support for Riel, particularly in Quebec, has not flagged. In 2003, CBC Newsworld and its French counterpart, Réseau de l'information, staged a "retrial" of Riel and asked viewers to vote as the jury. Over 10,000 votes came in; 87% were for a "not guilty" verdict. The CBC's Greatest Canadians project, also based on popular votes, established Riel as the 11th "Greatest Canadian."





ABORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO SPORTS IN CANADA

Tommy Longboat (1887 - 1949) may be the most famous Aboriginal athlete Canada has yet produced. Born at the Six Nations reserve in 1887, Longboat was given the Indian name of Cogwagee, which translates as “Everything.” Longboat loved to run, and amazed his neighbours with his extraordinary speed, particularly over long distances. In one race with his brother between two towns, the brother drove a horse and buggy and Tommy raced on foot; the runner arrived half an hour before the horse and buggy.

He won race after race in southwestern Ontario and in 1907, he set his sites on the premiere race of the day - indeed, one that remains the premiere race one century later -- the Boston Marathon. He won in a record time of 2:24:24, almost five minutes faster than the previous record.

Among the most attractive sports events of that era - as sure of a crowd-drawer as a boxing match - were footraces between two runners. Tommy Longboat joined in such races professionally. After he bested the English runner Alfie Shrubbs, Longboat became the world champion footracer.

Longboat served in World War I, serving as a dispatch runner carrying messages between communication posts. After World War I, the mania for footraces had died down, and Longboat turned to other means of making his living. He died in 1949 but is remembered in many ways, including the Tom Longboat Awards, given to the top Aboriginal amateur athletes.

Brian Trottier, the hockey player, was born to a Cree/Chippewa father in Val Marie, Saskatchewan and went on to become one of the highest scoring players in the history of the National Hockey League. Holding the NHL records for most points in a period (6 points) and the longest playoff scoring streak (27 games), Trottier won the Calder Memorial Trophy (rookie of the year), the Art Ross Trophy (most points in a season), the Hart Trophy (most valuable player) and the Conn Smythe Trophy (playoff MVP). Over an amazing hall of fame career both as a player and a coach, Brian Trottier’s legendary leadership skills paved the way for current NHL players like Jordin Tootoo and Jonathan Cheechoo and in 1998 he was ranked number 30 on the Hockey News’ list of the 100 Greatest Hockey Players.

Alwyn Morris, world-class kayaker, came to international attention at the 1984 summer Olympics, where he won gold for the 1,000-metre two-man race, and bronze for the 500 metre two-man race. Upon receiving his medal, Morris raised an eagle feather to the Aboriginal youth of Canada. After his kayaking career, Morris turned to working with Aboriginal youth and has been a champion for opening new opportunities to Aboriginal youth in Canada. He has founded the Alwyn Morris Educational and Athletic Foundation to support this effort.



ABORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE MILITARY IN CANADA

Tommy Prince was the most decorated Aboriginal soldier in Canada in the 20th century. He served in World War II and in Korea, receiving 11 medals, including the Military Medal and the American Silver Star. Prince is among Canada's most highly decorated non-commissioned officers.

Born in 1915 into the Brokenhead Band in Manitoba, Tommy Prince was one of 11 children. He was sent to residential school at the age of five. Throughout his teen years, Prince wanted to join the army and engage in the coming war in Europe, but every time he tried to enlist he was rejected by discriminatory policies. Finally he was able to enlist in June of 1940.

In the army, Prince became one of many Aboriginal soldiers who showed canny instincts on the field and powerful leadership capabilities. He was admired for his quick thinking, initiative and unquestioned bravery. "All my life I had wanted to do something to help my people recover their good name," he later said. "I wanted to show they were as good as any white man."

In 1942 Prince was selected for an elite force of 1600 specialists who were to be inserted behind enemy lines. The combined unit of Americans and Canadians trained in Montana was known to the Allies as the First Special Service Force, and came to be known to the enemy as "the Devil's Brigade." The Force played a critical role in the Allied forces' landing at Anzio. Prince distinguished himself when, almost singlehandedly, he ambushed a German encampment. Lt. Col. Thomas Gilday says of Prince, "He had the superior ability to find his way around, to know where other people were, and they'd never know where he was."

Prince's outstanding field work in Italy was repeated later in France, and later in the Korean conflict, where he served until a leg injury removed him from battle. He was discharged from the forces in 1954. His postwar life was unfortunate; he spent his final years as an alcoholic, living at the Salvation Army Service Centre in Winnipeg. He died in 1977.

Francis Pegahmagabow was the most highly decorated Aboriginal soldier of World War I. An Ojibwa from the Parry Island Band in Ontario, Pegahmagabow was awarded Canada's prestigious Military Medal, as well as bars for bravery in Belgium and France.

His specialty was as a marksman and sniper. In *Forgotten Soldiers*, Fred Gaffon said of him, "His iron nerves, patience and superb marksmanship helped make him an outstanding sniper." He was also regarded as a superior scout. He is credited with having captured more than 300 enemy soldiers. His son has said, "He used to go behind enemy lines, rub shoulders with the enemy forces and never get caught." Yet Pegahmagabow is remembered above all as man of peace. As his son remembered, "He was always saying how we have to live in harmony with all living things."



Henry Norwest was another Aboriginal marksman and sniper, who achieved a near-record of 115 fatal shots. Born in Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta to French-Cree parents, he spent his youth as a farmhand and occasional rodeo rider. He enlisted in the army in 1915 under the name Henry Louie and three months later was discharged for bad behaviour. He reenlisted under the name Henry Norwest, and went on to become one of the Canadian's army's best snipers.

He had the gifts of a great sniper: excellent marksmanship, an ability to lie still for many hours at a time, and a gift for camouflage. He worked the area called "No Man's Land," the danger zone between conflicting armies. His shooting proved decisive in the Vimy Ridge battles over a peak called "the Pimple," and for this he was awarded the Military Medal. At the battle of Amiens, he destroyed several German machine-gun posts. Regrettably, not long afterwards - and a scant three months before the war ended - Norwest was felled by a sniper's bullet.





ABORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ARTS IN CANADA

Bill Reid (1920 - 1998) exemplifies the role of the Aboriginal artist in Canada, perhaps better than any other figure. His brilliant, largely restorative touch has reawakened an ancient tradition of Haida art and drawn enormous attention to the arts of the Northwest Coast.

His odyssey was unusual: he ended his career much more in the native tradition than he began it. In “Apprentice to a Lost Art,” critic Roger Downey observes, “When Bill Reid began his exploration of Northwest Coast art, he did so as a ‘white man’ investigating a set of formal design problems. Over the years, perhaps inevitably, his success in unlocking the principles of Coast Indian art have progressively unlocked the INdian in Bill Reid himself.”

Although Bill Reid grew up as a Haida native from his mother’s side - his father was an American hotel owner of German/Scot ancestry -- Reid was unaware of his Haida ancestry until his teens. He worked in Toronto as a radio announcer with CBC and while doing that, studied jewellery design. In 1951 he returned to Vancouver where he set up a basement workshop for jewellery. It was at this time he began a formal and exhaustive exploration into the origins of Haida art.

Seven years before his death in 1998 Reid would say, “Haida culture has been wrecked. Their language is gone. Their mythology is gone. The genealogies of the big families are lost. If they’re going to find their way back to the world of cultured men, then they have to begin at the beginning.”

Reid began at the beginning and his career after the 1950s launched a renaissance of Haida art. Today Reid’s work in all media, from totem poles to carvings to sketches, can be seen in numerous museums across Canada. The Canadian twenty dollar bill carries the image his famous bronze sculpture, *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*.

Buffy Ste-Marie, the world-famous folk singer, was born in 1941 on the Piapot [Cree reserve](#) in the [Qu’Appelle](#) valley, [Saskatchewan](#). She grew up in Maine and Massachusetts with a couple who were related to her real parents. She went on to the University of Massachusetts, where she acquired a degree in Oriental Philosophy and a PhD in Fine Arts.

Her singing career began in 1964 with the album, “It’s My Way,” and now includes some 20 recorded albums. Her songwriting has been as stellar as her own career as a singer. She has written songs recorded by artists as diverse as Elvis Presley, Neil Diamond, Roberta Flack, Barbra Streisand, Cher and Bobby Darin.

Her career has been remarkably eclectic. Over five years she participated in the children’s TV show *Sesame Street* with her child Dakota Starblanket Wolfchild. A gifted digital artist, she has been working with computer art for decades and has exhibited her work in Calgary, Vancouver, Winnipeg and Santa Fe. In 1996 she launched her Cradleboard Teaching Project among Aboriginal bands in eleven U.S. states; one of its features is a multimedia curriculum CD called *Science: Through Native American Eyes*.



Zacharias Kunuk is the world’s best-known Aboriginal filmmaker. Born in 1957 in Kapuivik, a village in what is now Nunavut, Kunuk was deeply influenced by his mother’s bedtime stories, rich in traditional Inuit lore. Until the age of nine, he was raised in traditional Inuit life, then he was sent to school hundreds of miles away to learn English. There he discovered films, particularly westerns. Kunuk has noted that the American westerns made everyone “think like the soldiers.” He began looking for ways to tell stories from the Aboriginal side.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Kunuk learned filmmaking. His early films showcase traditional Inuit life from earlier times, and stress community challenges carried out by everyone in the community, such as building a stone house or cutting ice blocks. This attentiveness to community actions gives texture and nuance to the lives of the Inuit community in *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*, Kunuk’s first feature film and one of the most widely applauded debuts in recent film history. *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* won the Camera d’Or at Cannes in 2001 and was followed several years later by *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. Both films depict traditional Inuit life with an attentiveness and exactitude unrivaled in the history of movies.

