

## The Colonial Office and the Prairies in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

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**ABSTRACT.** Very little has been written on British attitudes to the western portions of British North America. Ged Martin, a British historian, has chronicled the "unofficial" views but these had little impact upon official attitudes and actions. As this study of Herman Merivale, permanent undersecretary at the Colonial Office, reveals, official attitudes and actions were characterized by great restraint, caution and support for the well-entrenched monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company. The reasons for this policy of the Colonial Office were complex and varied. Merivale and his colleagues believed the Company had treated the native population with humanity and had maintained law and order. Free trade and the end of Company rule would have meant anarchy and with it the enormous expense involved in setting up and defending a new colony on the prairies. This step the Colonial Office steadfastly refused to take in the mid-nineteenth century. The whole problem was shuffled off to the Canadian government in 1867. The legacy of British official attitudes was largely negative and led directly to the armed rebellions on the prairies and the "last war drum" in the late nineteenth century. Merivale realized in 1861 that the Colonial Office's policy toward the prairies had been characterized by failure. He and his colleagues had not been able to reconcile the contradictory principles of colonial self-government, free trade and protection of the native peoples.

### RESUME

Très peu de choses ont été écrites concernant l'attitude britannique à l'égard des parties occidentales de l'Amérique du Nord britannique. Ged Martin, un historien britannique a fait la chronique des vues "non-officielles" mais celles-ci n'ont eu que peu d'impact sur les attitudes et les actions officielles. Comme cette étude d'Herman Merivale, sous-secrétaire permanent au bureau des Affaires Coloniales le révèle, les actions et les attitudes officielles furent caractérisées par d'importantes contraintes, de la prudence et un support à l'égard du monopole très retranché de la Compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson. Les raisons de cette politique du bureau des Affaires Coloniales étaient complexes et variées. Merivale et ses collègues pensaient que la compagnie avait traité la population indigène avec humanité et avait maintenu la loi et l'ordre. Le commerce libre et la fin de l'autorité de la Compagnie auraient amené l'anarchie et avec elle l'énorme dépense nécessaire à l'installation et à la défense d'une nouvelle colonie dans les prairies. Etape que le bureau des affaires Coloniales refusa fermement de franchir durant le milieu du dix-neuvième siècle. La responsabilité de ce problème fut rejetée sur le gouvernement canadien en 1867. L'héritage des attitudes officielles britanniques fut en grande partie négatif et conduisit directement aux rebellions armées dans les prairies et au "dernier tambour de guerre" à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle. Merivale réalisa en 1867 que la politique du Bureau des Affaires Coloniales à l'égard des prairies avait été marquée par l'échec. Ses collègues et lui même n'avaient pas été capables de réconcilier les principes contradictoires d'un gouvernement colonial autonome, du commerce libre et de la protection des populations indigènes.

Canadian historians, in their studies of the prairies in the late nineteenth century, have focused their attention on the "last war drum." In contrast, very little has been written about the development of the prairies in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet, as Ged Martin, a British historian, has already noted, and this study by Herman Merivale, permanent undersecretary at the Colonial Office, reveals, the major problems which led to armed conflict in the late nineteenth century were already a source of concern for the British public, politicians and administrators. In Ged Martin's survey of "unofficial" opinion in Britain towards prairie settlement he argued that the development of the prairies was regarded as a "natural link" between Canada and the Pacific northwest. The building of a railroad would

make this link tangible and facilitate the material progress of the prairies. A union of all the British North American colonies would follow and act as a counterweight to the growing power of the United States. As Martin hints this "unofficial view" did not correspond with official ideas and actions.<sup>1</sup>

The Colonial Office was that part of the British government which was directly responsible to Parliament for the development of the prairies. Within the Office the civil servant who was chiefly concerned with the prairies was its permanent undersecretary, Herman Merivale. As the Colonial Office's head, Merivale was able to concern himself with whatever interested him. His inordinate interest in the "native" question throughout the British Empire led him quite naturally to investigate relations between the native peoples and the Hudson's Bay Company in British North America. For this reason Colonial Office attitudes to the prairies in the mid-nineteenth century were a direct reflection of Merivale's ideas and made an impact upon the decisions of the Secretaries of State for the Colonies.

Merivale's attitudes to the development of the prairies were, quite unlike "unofficial" opinion, based upon two important considerations: maintenance of the monopoly and charter of the Hudson's Bay Company, and the improvement of the social and economic condition of the native peoples. The Hudson's Bay Company had control over the prairies as an informal agent of the British Empire but it was responsible to the Colonial Office for its treatment of the native population. In the mid-nineteenth century when the doctrines of free trade were influential it was not thought to be necessarily evil to have a commercial company superintend the affairs of the native peoples. As a classical political economist and a disciple of Adam Smith, Merivale did not see anything wrong with this arrangement as long as the Colonial Office could make certain that the Company fulfilled its mandate. More than anything else the Colonial Office feared the consequences if Company rule was allowed to lapse. Free trade in furs would mean that alcohol would be used increasingly as a gift and as a trading item and the social and economic condition of the native peoples would deteriorate as a consequence. Free trade and the end of the Company's administration would also mean that the fur trade economy as well as the hunting-gathering economies of the native peoples would be replaced by an agricultural society, with an increase in white settlers from Britain, Canada and the United States. These possibilities raised the spectre of anarchy within this part of the British Empire—a condition abhorrent to the minds of the mandarins of Downing Street. Merivale and his colleagues were much more restrained and less optimistic concerning the future of the prairies compared with "unofficial" opinion in Britain. Moreover the interests of the Colonial Office and the Hudson's Bay Company did not always coincide.



As permanent undersecretary at the Colonial Office Herman Merivale was confronted by these conflicting ideas and interests. He was also extremely critical of British policy towards prairie settlement.<sup>2</sup> Possessing advanced ideas concerning the economic development of colonies and the "native" question from his years as Professor of Political Economy at the University of Oxford, Merivale was often able to influence the views of the politicians and his fellow civil servants in the Colonial Office. Frequently the various Secretaries of State (after the departure of Lord Grey in 1852) took Merivale's advice over that of any other person in the Office. Despite the debate within the Office and Merivale's particular ideas and influence, there is no doubt that, unable to determine the significance of conflicting reports from the prairies, Canada and Britain, Merivale and his colleagues found that they could not execute their policies. As an alternative, but one which they realized was hardly suitable in an age of free trade, they gave the Hudson's Bay Company a relatively free hand in the governance of the prairies and all of Rupert's Land. The Colonial Office's naive hope that the Company would be the best agent of the British Empire to protect the native population proved to be illusory. Clearly the Hudson's Bay Company was, as it always had been, primarily interested in financial gain derived from its trade in furs.<sup>3</sup>

The Colonial Office did not develop its policies entirely on pragmatic grounds because of the presence of Merivale as its chief civil servant. The responsibilities of a permanent undersecretary in mid-nineteenth century Britain were varied and crucial to the efficiency of the Colonial Office.<sup>4</sup> Merivale was an unusual permanent undersecretary, if compared with his predecessor, James Stephen, and his successor, Frederic Rogers. Born in 1806 as the son of a poor London lawyer, Merivale became, like his contemporary Thomas Babington Macaulay, a child prodigy. After attending the best public schools including Harrow (largely because his uncle had been the Headmaster of this institution), Merivale went up to Oxford for his B.A. and M.A., and at the age of twenty-two became a Fellow of Balliol College. Despite his academic achievements Merivale decided to become a lawyer and was called to the Bar in 1832. He soon found it exceedingly difficult to live in London and raise a large family on a lawyer's salary, and, accordingly, he eagerly accepted the offer of the University of Oxford to become Drummond Professor of Political Economy in 1837.

For the next five years Merivale was able to continue his study and writing dealing with questions concerning classical political economy, with a new emphasis upon the expansion of European empires overseas. As Drummond Professor his chief duties consisted of delivering a series of lectures which were published in 1841 as his *Lectures on Colonization and Colonies*. With his reputation now

firmly established, Merivale continued to write on these questions for the Whig periodical, the *Edinburgh Review*. He was, however, unable to attain his next objective, the post of Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge and for the next five years went back to the law as Recorder for the Cornish boroughs of Falmouth, Helston and Penzance.

In the fall of 1847 Merivale accepted Lord Grey's offer of appointment as assistant undersecretary of state at the Colonial Office. Grey chose Merivale to replace James Stephen because of the latter's sudden physical and mental collapse and Stephen's recommendation that Merivale was the best external candidate. There were in Grey's view no suitable internal candidates. When Stephen was not able to return to his duties Merivale was promoted to the permanent undersecretaryship in the winter of 1848. Merivale, the intellectual, had become a career civil servant at the age of 41 and he remained an imperial administrator until he died in February 1874. Although he was initially greatly influenced by the ideas of Grey and Stephen, Merivale was not a sycophant at the Colonial Office. He introduced new ideas and procedures and frequently found himself far ahead of his more pragmatic colleagues.<sup>5</sup> Nowhere was this more true than in Merivale's views on the "native" question.

Merivale regarded the "native" question, which he defined as the contact and conflict which had been created by the presence of Europeans overseas, as one of the most crucial problems of the nineteenth century. In 1841 in his *Lectures* Merivale had written that the best solution was to maintain control, from the metropolitan centre, over the relationship between Europeans and native peoples. Depending on the local circumstances, the native population would ostensibly be protected (and eventually assimilated) either by a policy of insulation (by means of which a system of reserves or locations would be developed which would effectively separate the native peoples from white settlers) or by amalgamation (by means of which the native population would be encouraged in every possible way, including miscegenation, to adopt the "superior" material culture of the white population).<sup>6</sup> The implementation of these policies would be delegated to the metropolitan government's representatives on the spot, usually the colonial governor rather than the colonial legislature. His experience at the Colonial Office made him more aware of the danger of giving the white settlers of each colony control over native affairs but despite his awareness of this weakness in the policies of insulation and amalgamation he did not propose an alternative nor implement one at the Colonial Office. The western portions of British North America clearly fascinated him because there were few white settlers; therefore the prairies would provide an excellent testing ground for his theories on the "native" question. No region of the British Empire in the mid-nineteenth century, however, revealed



the inadequacies of these policies more than the Hudson's Bay Company territories and Rupert's Land.

For the Colonial Office in the mid-nineteenth century the major problem was almost always associated with the simple fact that the colonies were so far away from Downing Street. Lacking knowledge of or having scarcely any information about many colonies, the permanent officials had no choice but to rely on the despatches of the colonial governors. In the case of Rupert's Land there was no governor appointed by the Colonial Office. Instead the Hudson's Bay Company paid and appointed a governor to administer Assiniboia. The Colonial Office could only find out what was happening on the prairies at third hand through the Hudson's Bay Company in London via the Company's governor on the spot and Sir George Simpson in Montreal. In such an unsatisfactory situation the Colonial Office, thousands of miles away, had great difficulty in determining a course of action when faced with the conflicting reports of the native peoples and the Hudson's Bay Company. Merivale knew that there were only two other alternatives, both of which would be inconvenient and expensive. The Colonial Office could send an official representative to the area with instructions to make official inquiries and then report directly back to Downing Street. A more drastic course would be to remove Company rule and replace it with a crown colony like the other British North American colonies. For various reasons the Colonial Office steadfastly refused to take this step before the Canadian Confederation was formed in 1867.<sup>7</sup>

The permanent officials and the politicians in the Colonial Office rarely disagreed on their approach to "native" policies. More conflict was generated between the Colonial Office and the colonial governor. In 1852 after the departure of Lord Grey (with the fall of Lord John Russell's administration) the political heads of the Office were changed frequently because of ministerial instability and the Crimean War.<sup>8</sup> The Secretaries of State and the parliamentary undersecretaries, therefore, relied heavily on Merivale's knowledge of specific problems. The one area where Merivale exerted the most influence was "native" policy. He was extremely critical, more so than his colleagues, and constantly complained that "... too little attention was given to the problem of managing uncivilized natives along with responsible government."<sup>9</sup> Despite this acute perception of the weakness inherent in this particular aspect of British imperial policy, Merivale was unable to change the situation from his office in Downing Street.<sup>10</sup> He lacked knowledge of the natural resources, the economic capabilities and the culture of the native peoples in each colony.

Merivale's ideas concerning the culture of the native peoples were, like those of his British contemporaries, general rather than detailed and based on secondary sources rather than direct contact. The sources for his ideas were representative of the mid-nineteenth century

and his two lucid chapters on the "native" question were a general, analytical synthesis of the available European knowledge concerning native peoples. In his *Lectures* and in review articles in the *Edinburgh Review*, Merivale exhibited a great deal of interest in the Indians of North America in particular. In 1841, for example, he described the North American Indians in the following fashion:

...they seemed possessed of higher moral elevation than any other uncivilized race of mankind, with less natural readiness and ingenuity than some but greater depth and force of character; more native generosity of spirit, and manliness of disposition; more of the religious element; and yet, on the other hand, if not with less capacity for improvement, certainly less readiness to receive it; a more thorough wildness of temperament; less curiosity, inferior excitability; greater reluctance to associate with civilized men; a more ingovernable impatience of control. And their primitive condition of hunters, and aversion from every other, greatly increases the difficulty of including them in the arrangements of a regular community.<sup>11</sup>

The view that the native peoples could not be included "in the arrangements of a regular community" was later to be the most forceful in the Colonial Office's decision not to establish a British colony with representative institutions on the prairies. Locked into the doctrines of free trade and colonial self-government for the white settlers overseas, the politicians and administrators could not possibly countenance granting the same to native people who, they believed, were not able to understand the value of British customs, laws and institutions. In 1841 Merivale concluded that the Indians of North America were too self-sufficient and satisfied with their own way of life to adopt any other. The "advantages" of a formal European education, leading to "intellectual acquirement" and ultimately to "material improvement," would be lost for these people. The only choice was to assert, as Merivale did, that culturally the North American Indian was a "barbarian."<sup>12</sup> This position did not make him a racist.<sup>13</sup>

Theoretical ideas debated in Britain by armchair commentators, such as Merivale was in the 1830s and 1840s, would not have had any direct impact on the native people of North America. When these ideas became part of the cultural proclivities of Britons overseas, then it was, as Merivale realized, a very different matter. Regarded as "savages" by the white settlers,<sup>14</sup> the Indians had been pushed into the interior of North America until there was no more land for them to occupy and use for hunting, trapping and fishing. As a consequence Merivale observed that

...the vast surface of the Prairies was unable to receive the retreating myriads who had been expelled from the forest. Then the reflex took place. Thinned, dispirited, degraded, the remnants of powerful tribes returned eastwards toward their former seats; and either threw themselves on the mercy of governments, or



attracted attention to their wants by becoming dangerous neighbours on the skirts of the settled country. Then, and rarely till then, reserves of lands were allotted to them, in various parts, both of the States and of Canada; and endeavours were made to Christianize and civilize them. Up to that time, the notion of assigning to them a property in a part of the soil they once occupied seems to have been hardly entertained.<sup>15</sup>

The major problem confronting the British government was the apparent unwillingness of the native people to assimilate with the white population. Merivale regarded the very different conceptions of land and labour as the primary cause of conflict in Indian-white relations. Yet contradictorily, in his *Lectures* he reiterated that white settlers should be able to own the land which they occupied:

...if we recognize the principle that colonists should govern themselves, except in those particulars where the exercise of self-government would necessarily clash with imperial sovereignty, this is one of the functions which would seem in theory more peculiarly fit to be exercised by the colonial, not the imperial, authorities.<sup>16</sup>

It is significant that this argument was broached by Merivale before the granting of responsible government to any British colony and before his appointment to the Colonial Office. Later, in Downing Street, he would experience great difficulty reconciling the policy of colonial self-government for white settlers, but not for the native people, with his desire to protect the latter from the colonial authorities. This serious problem was unique to the nineteenth century because before this time there had been no "systematic regulation" in the "disposal of lands"; there was sufficient land for both groups to use and, most important of all, the "danger from Indians" (native resistance) had prevented the white settlers from straying too far into the wilderness.<sup>17</sup> Nineteenth century circumstances and theories derived from classical political economy brought enormous changes in native-white relations. As a classical political economist and a disciple of Adam Smith and Edward Gibbon Wakefield, Merivale argued that colonies should become self-sufficient as soon as possible in land, capital and labour. Of these three elements labour was the most important for "land and capital are both useless unless labour can be commanded."<sup>18</sup> This principle could only be implemented if the skilled labour of the Europeans was given priority over that of the subsistence economies and labour of the native population. The development of the prairies in the nineteenth century was one of the most vivid examples of this process.

In the mid-nineteenth century there was only a small agricultural settlement on the banks of the Red River, in the vicinity of the present site of the city of Winnipeg. Few Europeans had any comprehensive knowledge of this region and this group of individuals included the employees of the Hudson's Bay Company and a handful of mission-

aries. Given these circumstances the native peoples still participated in the most important economic activity—the fur trade—supplying the chief source of skilled labour as trappers, voyageurs or buffalo hunters. In the southern areas of Rupert's Land and on the prairies the trade in furs was in decline. The mid-nineteenth century was therefore a transitional phase before the development of an agricultural economy.<sup>19</sup> The years from 1840 to 1860 were not barren of activity and the many problems which arose proved to be very challenging for Merivale.

Merivale believed that the Hudson's Bay Company's presence in North America was, despite its monopoly and compared with the alternatives, preferable to having no informal or formal imperial agent in these areas. Moreover he thought that the Company operated its business in the economic interest of the native population. The Company used these people as skilled labour in the fur trade on a seasonal or a permanent basis. Some Métis and Indian people were hired seasonally on short term contracts to help transport the Company's trade goods and furs. The majority worked permanently as hunters and trappers without any contract. Although the latter had become, by the middle of the nineteenth century, dependent on the Company's trade goods, they were still independent of Company influence insofar as their daily existence was concerned. The reason for this situation was clear. If the Company did not treat its skilled native labour humanely then there was always a distinct possibility that the Company's supply of furs would be either disrupted or curtailed altogether in any particular region. Using this reasoning Merivale marshalled his arguments and concluded that, for the circumstances existing in Rupert's Land in the mid-nineteenth century, the best ruler was the Hudson's Bay Company. This belief was not shaken by the protests of the native people as submitted to the Colonial Office by their representative, Alexander Isbister.

Able and enigmatic, Alexander Isbister was a former employee of the Hudson's Bay Company. Although he was one of the chief representatives of the native peoples of Rupert's Land in London in the mid-nineteenth century, he has been generally ignored by Canadian historians. Isbister's father had been a trader for the Company and, in the 1830s, Alexander had followed his father's career in the fur trade as a clerk. He left Rupert's Land in the late 1830s, went to Scotland and graduated from Edinburgh University. By the late 1840s he had maintained his contacts with the native people in Rupert's Land so well that he became their agent in London. Constantly pestering the civil servants in the Colonial Office with petitions and letters, Isbister made a great impact on the manner in which Merivale and his colleagues perceived the development of the prairies in the 1850s.<sup>20</sup>



Isbister's presence raised an important problem for the Colonial Office. It had no method by which it could ascertain the veracity of Isbister's complaints against Company rule and did not have an independent authority on the spot to investigate them impartially. Furthermore Isbister's case was hurt because it was not well-documented and was too general. Representative of Isbister's claims was the petition which he presented to the Colonial Office in 1847. In this document the "Delegates from the Natives of Rupert's Land" declared that the cause of all their misfortunes was the existence of the monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company. They alleged that the Company had perpetrated such abuses as to cause the "utter impoverishment, if not ruin, to the natives" without any corresponding benefits. The Company had not fulfilled its mandate to make social, economic and religious improvements and had failed to prepare the native people for future political changes, especially colonial self-government. Despite the assurances of the Company, it had not eradicated the use of alcohol as a gift and a trading item and had failed to implement effective conservation measures. The native delegates also warned of the growing scarcity of food supplies which, they argued, would lead eventually to "all the horrors of famine, and the attendant crimes of murder and cannibalism." Isbister concluded this dire account of the condition of the native peoples with the following plea:

When we assert that they are steeped in ignorance, debased in mind, and crushed in spirit, that by the exercise of an illegal claim over the country of their forefathers, they are deprived of the natural rights and privileges of free born men, that they are virtually slaves, as absolutely as the unredeemed negro population of the slave states of America—that by a barbarous and selfish policy, founded on a love of lucre, their affections are alienated from the British name and government, and they themselves shut out from civilisation, and debarred from every incentive thereto—that the same heinous system is gradually effacing whole tribes from the soil on which they were born and nurtured, so that a few years hence not one man among them will be left to point out where the bones of his ancestors repose—when we assert all this in honest, simple truth, does it not behove every Christian man to demand that the British legislature should not continue to incur the fearful responsibility of permitting the extinction of these helpless, forlorn thousands of their fellow creatures, by lending its countenance to a monopoly engendering so huge a mountain of human misery. For the honour of this great country, we pray it will not be; and, sincerely trust we, some few voices will respond earnestly, Amen.<sup>21</sup>

Although these denunciations of the Company's monopoly were both eloquent and prophetic they needed to be verified by an independent and impartial observer or inquiry before the Colonial Office could act on them. This step the Colonial Office seriously considered but steadily refused to take in the 1850s.

The Colonial Office, even before its receipt of Isbister's petition, realized that its primary difficulty was distance. It was virtually impossible for the administrator in London, thousands of miles away from the Indians, Métis and white traders to judge the accuracy of reports coming from the prairies. Merivale had considered this question before he had been appointed permanent undersecretary. In his *Lectures* Merivale had drawn from the historical experience of the Spanish regime in South America and had suggested that an "imperial officer" or a "protector" of Indians should be appointed by the British government to overcome the problem of distance. As was usually the case with suggestions from professors, Merivale's alternative had not been acted upon before he arrived at the Colonial Office. As a civil servant, undoubtedly for reasons of economy, Merivale did not act on his own suggestion but instead relied on the reports of the colonial governors or naval and military officers. As he discovered during Sir George Grey's years in the Cape Colony, this method was not always satisfactory.<sup>22</sup>

In the specific case arising from Isbister's petition Merivale proposed initially that the British government appoint an English traveller to check on these complaints on the spot, and report to the Colonial Office on his return to Britain. Merivale completely rejected missionary accounts because he considered them distorted by the clergy's vested interest in the native peoples. This approach was markedly different from that taken during the 1830s and early 1840s under James Stephen's regime. Later in the 1850s the Colonial Office, acting on the suggestion of Merivale and John Ball, then the parliamentary undersecretary of state, adopted the plan which sent a former British traveller, John Palliser, to the prairies with an expedition.<sup>23</sup> In the late 1840s, however, Merivale cautioned Lord Grey that the appointment of an official inquiry would entail a direct investigation of the Hudson's Bay Company and its affairs, including the Company's relations with the Métis and the Indians. If the Company was found to be neglecting its responsibilities then it was likely that the Company's administration would have to be replaced by a new one set up and paid for by the British government. The Red River colony and perhaps all of Rupert's Land would have crown colony status, under the aegis of the Colonial Office. The officials in the Colonial Office including Herman Merivale shrank from the thought of the enormous expense involved if such a course of action were adopted.

When investigating Isbister's letters in the early 1850s Merivale placed great weight upon the report of Major John Crofton who had been governor of Assiniboia for the Hudson's Bay Company. Crofton exonerated the Company of any wrong-doing but he was hardly an impartial authority because he was dependent on the Company for his position and had been greatly influenced by the views



of the Company's governor in North America, George Simpson.<sup>24</sup> After receiving another report from Lord Elgin, then the Governor-General of Canada, who was in Toronto and far away from the problem, Merivale dismissed Isbister's allegations. Merivale concluded that the Company's rule was, on the whole, "very advantageous to the Indians." He argued effectively that if the Company was replaced and its monopoly ended then the fur trade would be thrown open to all traders, competition would increase significantly and alcohol would be used as a trading item on a large scale. Lord Grey accepted Merivale's analysis and nothing was done about Isbister and the petition from the native peoples of Rupert's Land.

The Colonial Office had refused to take on the most difficult task of governing Rupert's Land. This attitude is understandable for the financial and administrative resources of the Colonial Office were severely curtailed by what Merivale regarded as the "watchdogs" of spending in the Treasury Office and, ultimately, Parliament itself.<sup>25</sup> This decision was, however, a peculiar anomaly in the so-called era of free trade imperialism.<sup>26</sup> As pragmatists, Merivale and his colleagues skirted the major issue by basing their arguments on efficiency and a dubious comparison of the Hudson's Bay Company with the East India Company. Merivale believed the former, like the latter, had one important advantage over any alternative system of administration:

... it was their power of dealing on a regular system with inferior or less powerful races. The Hudson's Bay Company have converted for trading purposes an immense region into a fur preserve, with a success which is perfectly astonishing, and could not be believed were it not in evidence from the supply of furs. Of course, this was simply for their own interest. But it could only be done through introducing a strict and vigorous discipline, which nothing but self-interest would have introduced, and which forms the best possible basis of dealing with savages.<sup>27</sup>

In the same minute Merivale compared the situation in Rupert's Land with that existing south of the forty-ninth parallel and could only conclude that there was no "alternative between the present system and perfect freedom, that is, such a state of perpetual war and pillage as subsists in the American prairies." Bluntly he wrote to his colleagues: "Mr. Isbister would have us destroy a regular government on account of its corruption, when the only alternative for it is anarchy."<sup>28</sup> Lord Grey agreed with this observation and ordered the clerks to send out a despatch based on Merivale's minute.<sup>29</sup>

In the case of Rupert's Land the objectives of the Colonial Office were at variance with its ability to implement its policy. The elements of Colonial Office policy in the mid-nineteenth century consisted of free trade, colonial self-government and adequate protection for the native population. In Rupert's Land the Office was faced with

a situation which revealed that its policies could not be wholly reconciled. The officials were confronted with a well-entrenched monopoly, indirect rule by a powerful commercial company and no mechanism to act as a check upon the treatment of the native peoples by the Company. As J. W. Cell had argued in his *British Colonial Administration in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* the policies devised by the Colonial Office were characterized by a continuous process of interaction between ideas formulated in London and their introduction in each colony. Merivale was aware of this aspect of imperial administration but was able to do little to obviate it because of the problem of distance and the particular circumstances faced by the Colonial Office in the 1850s.<sup>30</sup>

In the winter of 1852, with the fall of Lord John Russell's administration, Merivale's role in the Colonial Office grew apace. Lord Grey's successors were wholly inadequate. There were frequent ministerial changes and few of the Secretaries of State, who almost literally 'passed through' the Office from 1852 to 1860, had any experience with imperial affairs. The two major exceptions were the fifth Duke of Newcastle and Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton who presided over the mandarins in Downing Street in 1852-1854 and 1858-1859 respectively. With these two politicians in particular Merivale worked very closely and the day-to-day operations of the Office ran smoothly. At other times he had to spend an inordinate amount of his time "lecturing" his political counterparts on the political, social and economic conditions which existed in each colony. In the latter case it was evident to Merivale that the overall effectiveness of the Colonial Office was blunted.<sup>31</sup> This situation meant Merivale had to tailor the long-range plans which he had developed in his *Lectures* and other writings to what was possible in the short term.<sup>32</sup>

From 1852 to 1857 the Colonial Office considered a number of projects submitted to it by interested and sometimes obviously ambitious individuals or companies which, if taken up and backed by the Colonial Office, would have led to the economic development of the prairies. More farsighted than his colleagues, who based their opposition solely on economic grounds, Merivale feared that the opening up of these new lands to agricultural settlement would spell the end of the rule of the Hudson's Bay Company and the fur trading society. The relative equality and the reciprocal self-interest of the fur trade would be upset and eventually destroyed.

In 1854 one such proposal came to Downing Street from Captain Millington Henry Syngé of the Royal Engineers. Syngé was also a writer and railway promoter. He believed that some mode of "rapid communication" should be established across the prairies which would aid the economic development of the region and, at the same time, bolster the defence of British North America from the Atlantic to the



Pacific. Merivale rejected this project and others like it because he knew that this part of the British Empire was not yet ready for such a grandiose undertaking:

When population overflows the great western region of the United States, and Canada, it will find its way into the far less attractive plains of Northwest America, and not before. In the meantime, it may be doubted whether these are not as advantageously placed under the control of an anti-colonizing body like the Hudson's Bay Co. which keeps up the fur-bearing animals in vast preserves, and keeps peace with the Indians, as under bands of wandering emigrants who would soon waste the former and quarrel with the latter, as in the case on the southern side of the United States line. . . .<sup>33</sup>

Merivale was certain that permanent white settlement would occur eventually, but he constantly warned his colleagues against precipitating it unduly.

Merivale's support for the charter and the monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company was also tested during the select parliamentary inquiry into the affairs of the Company in 1857. While the inquiry was being held in London, Merivale received a request from the Company's officials for a military force to be sent to the Red River colony. The Company claimed that Indians and Métis, encouraged by American traders, were causing unrest. A group of native people, led by William Kennedy, an uncle of Alexander Isbister, was, according to employees of the Company in Rupert's Land, stirring up trouble. These "trouble-makers" had learned of the appointment of the select parliamentary inquiry and of the possibility of the lapse of the Company's monopoly. Evidence of civil disorder in the Red River colony would certainly have been damaging to the Company's case because it had always argued that it had governed its territories efficiently and had maintained law and order. In his minute analyzing of this important subject Merivale discounted both the Company's assertions that Americans were entirely responsible for the unrest and the fears of his colleagues who believed that if troops were sent by Britain it might raise the spectre of war between Britain and the United States.<sup>34</sup> He recommended that troops should be sent, and subsequently the Royal Canadian Rifles were transferred from Montreal to Red River via Hudson Bay.<sup>35</sup> When this contingent arrived in the fall of 1857 their presence was sufficient to contain whatever problems the Company alleged existed in the colony. In this instance, as in others, Merivale and the other members of the Colonial Office saw no alternative to Company rule given the circumstances in which they were placed.<sup>36</sup>

In 1857 and 1858 the question of the Hudson's Bay Company's charter and the renewal of its licence remained of the utmost importance. Negotiations between the Company and the Colonial Office were long and complicated. Although these issues directly affected

the native peoples of Rupert's Land, they were not consulted. Moreover, official representatives of the Indians and Métis, notably Isbister and the Reverend Griffiths Owen Corbett, an Anglican missionary in the Red River settlement, appeared to have deserted the native cause in their testimony before the select parliamentary committee. Isbister advocated that the prairies be annexed to the Canadas and renamed "Canada North." Various forms of communication, including telegraph and railroads, would be developed with Canadian capital. This expansion would lead, according to Isbister's prognostications, to agricultural settlement of the prairies within twenty years.<sup>37</sup> Although this position was in direct contradiction to his previous assertions less than ten years previously, Isbister's testimony was certainly prescient. He impressed the members of the committee and, not surprisingly, the committee's recommendations were in keeping with his testimony. Nothing was done for ten years because Canada was in a state of political turmoil and economic recession. Canadian politicians were unwilling to take on the added responsibilities of administering this enormous colony.

With the future of the prairies held in abeyance the Colonial Office once again turned its attention to other questions. In 1858 the permanent undersecretary was somewhat taken aback upon receipt of a letter from the Reverend Corbett asking clarification of aboriginal claims to land. Merivale immediately brought this potentially controversial question to the attention of his colleagues:

... I mean the claims of the Indian tribes over portions of Lord Selkirk's land and generally over territories comprised in the Charter—the Americans have always taken care to extinguish such rights however vague. We have never adopted any very uniform system about them. I suppose the H.B.C. has never purchased from some claimants any of their land. And I fear (idle as such claims really are, when applied to vast regions of which only the smallest portion can ever be used for permanent settlement) that pending discussions are not unlikely to raise up a crop of them.<sup>38</sup>

There were, however, no land claims by the Métis and Indian people at this time and it appears highly unlikely that the Colonial Office would have dealt with them in a satisfactory manner had they been made. As in most of the other British North American colonies, and contrary to the Royal Proclamation of 1763, aboriginal rights were given short shrift by the British government, as well as by the Canadian government after 1867.<sup>39</sup>

In 1859 William Kennedy wrote to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Duke of Newcastle, raising the issue of land claims. Merivale advised Newcastle to answer Kennedy's query with great circumspection because the land question was of "considerable importance." Merivale noted that in the past the British government had never recognized the "territorial rights" of the native peoples



who inhabited this part of the British Empire. There had been no need to do so because the reciprocal economic interests of the fur trading society had obviated conflict. With the decline of the fur trade in the southern portions of the Company's territories the old fur trading society was being rapidly transformed. This process was already well underway by the mid-nineteenth century. Sensitive to these changes, but unwilling to do anything about them, Merivale advised Newcastle not to act until the Hudson's Bay Company's "rights to the soil are terminated." He argued at the same time that

...it might be pretty safely assumed, that no right of *property* would be admitted by the Crown as existing in mere nomadic hunting tribes over the wild land adjacent to the Red River settlement. But that agricultural Indian settlements (if any such exist) would be respected and that hunting ground actually so used by the Indians would either be reserved to them or else compensation made.<sup>40</sup>

Native peoples throughout the British Empire were considered to be inferior because of their "primitive" subsistence economies. Until the native population could approach the social and the economic self-sufficiency of Britain in the nineteenth century very little could be done to help them. Rupert's Land was no exception to this general imperial assumption. The land question remained an endless source of conflict for years to come culminating in two armed rebellions in the late nineteenth century.

In 1861 Merivale, now securely ensconced in the India Office, having resigned his position at the Colonial Office in March 1860, published the second edition of his *Lectures*. This second version was extremely important because he was able to use the opportunity to reflect upon the ideas which he had espoused twenty years previously. He revised considerably his earlier views on the "native question" in light of the failures of Colonial Office native policy in British North America and southern Africa. In the former the policy had vacillated between the ideal long range objectives of insulation and amalgamation and the short range necessities of economy and law and order. Consequently the fundamental issues of land and labour had been dealt with inconsistently or not at all. This failure, and Merivale regarded it as such, could be attributed to

...perpetual compromises between principle and immediate exigency. Such compromises are incidental to constitutional government. We are accustomed to them: there is something in them congenial to our national character, as well as accommodated to our institutions; and, on the whole, we may reasonably doubt whether the world is not better managed by means of them rather than through the severe application of principles. But, unfortunately, in the special subject before us [British policy towards the native peoples in the Empire], the uncertainty created by such compromises is a greater evil than errors of principle.<sup>41</sup>

trade and with it, the Hudson's Bay Company. Much has been written about the "last war drum" and, in comparison, almost nothing about the first examples of unrest in that society in which Louis Riel and his followers were raised.<sup>45</sup> By the 1850s the alternatives for the future development of the prairies were already apparent even to the arm-chair administrators in 13 and 14 Downing Street. This region of British North America did not become a crown colony (like Vancouver Island and British Columbia) and did not attain colonial self-government outside of the Canadian Confederation. The various complex reasons for these events have never been adequately explored. Could it in fact have been otherwise? Merivale and his colleagues at the Colonial Office would undoubtedly have answered affirmatively because they believed that they had a distinct choice between "principle and immediate exigency."

## FOOTNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Ged Martin, "British Attitudes to Prairie Settlement," *Alberta Historical Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Winter 1974, pp. 1-11. See also J. S. Galbraith, *The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, 1821-1869*, Toronto, 1957, pp. 311-354; W. L. Morton, *Manitoba, A History*, (Second Edition), Toronto, 1967, pp. 60-120; W. S. Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-1871*, Second Edition edited by L. H. Thomas, Toronto, 1973, pp. 802-851; G. F. G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada*, Toronto, 1960, pp. 44-66; A. C. Gluek, *Minnesota and the Manifest Destiny of the Canadian Northwest*, Toronto, 1965, pp. 78-117.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Merivale, *Lectures on Colonization and Colonies*, New York, 1967, p. 521.

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of the problems of the Red River colony see Frits Pannekoek, "The Anglican Church and the Disintegration of Red River Society, 1818-1870," in *The West and the Nation: Essays in Honour of W. L. Morton*, edited by C. Berger and Ramsay Cook, Toronto, 1976, pp. 72-90 and "The Rev. Griffiths Owen Corbett and the Red River Civil War of 1869-1870," *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 57, No. 2, June 1976, pp. 133-149. Pannekoek's thesis that the "rebellion" in 1869-1870 was a civil war is somewhat exaggerated and facile. As this article concludes the situation in Rupert's Land in the mid-nineteenth century is much more complex than Canadian historians have hitherto indicated.

<sup>4</sup> J. W. Cell, *British Colonial Administration in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, New Haven, 1970, pp. 8-22. For a different view which focuses on Herman Merivale and the period from 1847-1860 see D. McNab, "Herman Merivale and the British Empire, 1806-1874," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Lancaster, 1978, pp. 41-80.

<sup>5</sup> McNab, "Herman Merivale," pp. 14-40.

<sup>6</sup> McNab, "Herman Merivale and the Native Question," *Albion*, Vol. 9, No. 4, Winter 1977, pp. 359-384. See also G. C. Lewis, "Military Defence of Colonies," *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. 115, January 1862, p. 112, for a nineteenth century view and for a recent twentieth century adaptation H. Adams, *Prison of Grass, Canada from the Native Point of View*, Toronto, 1975, p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> This point was made by J. E. Hodgetts, *Pioneer Public Service*, Toronto, 1955, pp. 269-280, but it has never been developed fully by Canadian historians. For example see J. M. S. Careless, *The Union of the Canadas*, Toronto, 1967, p. 154, and compare L. F. S. Upton, "The Origins of Canadian Indian Policy," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4, November 1973, pp. 56-61. Merivale certainly believed that responsible government was a panacea for British North American problems and had proved to be a failure in the 1850's, McNab, "Herman Merivale," pp. 124-182.

<sup>8</sup> Cell, *British Colonial Administration*, pp. 3-44.

<sup>9</sup> D. P. Clarke, "The Attitude of the Colonial Office to the Working of Responsible Government, 1854-1868," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, 1953, pp. 167-168, 173.

<sup>10</sup> McNab, "Native Question," pp. 382-384.

<sup>11</sup> Merivale, *Lectures*, p. 493.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 526-530.

<sup>13</sup> McNab, "Native Question," pp. 359-361.



- 14 Merivale, "British Mission to Shoa," *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. 80, July 1844, p. 56.
- 15 Merivale, *Lectures*, p. 505.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 433.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 256–257.
- 19 A. J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, Toronto, 1974, pp. 195–231. For Merivale's view see "Mexico and the Great Western Prairies," *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. 78, July 1843, p. 176; "Mac Gregor—American commerce and statistics," *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. 86, October 1847, p. 394.
- 20 "Alexander Kennedy Isbister," *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. 10, p. 508; J. Brown, "Ultimate Respectability: Fur Trade Children in the 'Civilized World'," *The Beaver*, Winter 1977, Outfit 308: pp. 3, 4–10.
- 21 A. K. Isbister et al., *A Few Words on the Hudson's Bay Company*. . . London, n.d., pp. 1–24. For the consequences see R. Fumoleau, *As Long as this Land shall Last*, Toronto, 1976.
- 22 Merivale, *Lectures*, p. 494. For a different version see E. E. Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company, 1821–1870*, Vol. 3, Toronto, 1960, pp. 542–547. Merivale's fiasco with Sir George Grey in the Cape Colony is analyzed in McNab, "Native Question."
- 23 J. Palliser, *Solitary Rambles and Adventures of a Hunter in the Prairies*, Edmonton, 1969; I. M. Spry, ed., *The Papers of the Palliser Expedition, 1857–1860*, Toronto, 1968.
- 24 Galbraith, *The Little Emperor*, Toronto, 1976, pp. 193–194.
- 25 McNab, "Herman Merivale," pp. 41–80; Martin, "British Attitudes," p. 5.
- 26 C. C. Eldridge, *England's Mission: The Imperial Idea in the Age of Gladstone and Disraeli, 1868–1880*, London, 1973, pp. 1–52; *Victorian Imperialism*, London, 1978, pp. 10–73.
- 27 Colonial Office Records, Public Record Office, London, England, (hereafter cited as C.O.), 42/551 Merivale minute June 30, 1848 in Elgin to Grey, June 6, 1848, pp. 24–29.
- 28 *Ibid.* A different account is given in Galbraith, *Hudson's Bay Company*, pp. 311–332.
- 29 C.O. 42/551 Minute of Grey, July 1, 1848, p. 29. For the Company's view see Ellice Papers, National Library of Scotland, E 91, E. Ellice to Duke of Newcastle, September 21, 1859, p. 152. I am indebted to Dr. B. M. Gough for drawing my attention to Ellice's correspondence with the Colonial Office.
- 30 Cell, *British Colonial Administration*, pp. vii–xii.
- 31 McNab, "Herman Merivale," pp. 41–80.
- 32 C.O. 323/243 Merivale minute November 22, 1854 on Captain M. H. Syngé to Sir George Grey, October 5, 1854, p. 328. Compare with Martin, "British Attitudes," p. 4.
- 33 C.O. 6/23 Merivale minute March 18, 1857 on J. Shepherd to H. Labouchere, March 11, 1857, p. 11.
- 34 Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company*, p. 805.
- 35 C.O. 6/23 Merivale minute November 21, 1857 on J. Shepherd to H. Labouchere, November 20, 1857, p. 55.
- 36 Gluek, "Imperial Protection for the Trading Interests of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1857–1861," *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 37, 1956, pp. 119–140; E. A. Mitchell, "Edward Watkin and the Buying-Out of the Hudson's Bay Company," *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 34, No. 3, September 1953, p. 326.
- 37 Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers, Colonies Canada, Select Committee on the Hudson's Bay Company, London, 1857, pp. iii–iv, 120–137, 353–356. Also see Galbraith, *Hudson's Bay Company*, pp. 341–345; Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company*, pp. 773–776, 788–789.
- 38 C.O. 6/27 Merivale minute March 31, 1858 on G. O. Corbett to H. Labouchere, February 4, 1858, pp. 261–262; Pannekoek, "Rev. Griffiths Owen Corbett," pp. 133–141.
- 39 D. Sanders, "The Nishga Case," *B.C. Studies*, No. 19, Autumn 1973, pp. 3–20.
- 40 C.O. 6/31 Merivale minute December 5, 1859 on W. Kennedy to Duke of Newcastle, December 2, 1859, pp. 201–202.
- 41 Merivale, *Lectures*, p. 521.
- 42 T. R. Berger, *Report of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry*, Vol. 1, Ottawa, 1977.
- 43 Merivale, *Lectures*, p. 518.
- 44 McNab, "Herman Merivale," pp. 41–80.
- 45 D. Morton, *The Last War Drum*, Toronto, 1972.