

Unsteady Debut: J.A.N. Provencher and the Beginnings of Indian Administration in Manitoba

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ABSTRACT. In 1873 prominent Quebec journalist J.A.N. Provencher became commissioner of Indian affairs in Manitoba. In this capacity he was responsible for the Indians who were signatories to Treaties 1, 2 and 3, supervising their transition to settled life. A political appointee, he was a poor administrator and his unsuitability for the job soon became apparent. By 1877 incompetence was no longer the government's main concern; serious criminal allegations had been made against the Indian commissioner, and an inquiry into these charges began. When the inquiry concluded in March 1878, Provencher was found guilty of fraudulent use of public funds. He had been supplying the Indians with inferior goods in collusion with local businessmen who had granted him certain credits and considerations in return. Provencher was dismissed but the government seemed to learn little from the exercise; as it expanded its presence in the prairie West, the Indian Department continued to be little more than a source of patronage appointments at the disposal of those in power.

SOMMAIRE. En 1873 l'éminent journaliste québécois J.A.N. Provencher devint commissaire des affaires indiennes pour le Manitoba. À ce titre il était responsable des Indiens signataires des Traités 1, 2 et 3, et de leur adaptation à la vie sédentaire. Nommé à ce poste pour des raisons politiques, il s'avéra médiocre administrateur. En 1877 ce n'était plus son incompetence qui inquiétait le gouvernement, mais les sérieuses allégations qui pesaient contre lui et qui devaient faire l'objet d'une enquête. À la fin de ladite enquête, en mars 1878, Provencher fut reconnu coupable d'usage frauduleux de fonds publics: de connivence avec des hommes d'affaires de la région qui lui offraient certaines faveurs en retour, il avait fourni aux Indiens des denrées de qualité inférieure. Provencher fut licencié, mais le gouvernement n'avait pas retenu sa leçon: tandis qu'il étendait sa zone d'influence sur les prairies, le département des affaires indiennes poursuivait ses relations de copinage avec les personnes au pouvoir.

Je ne veux pas y croire! lui, si fort, si robuste, si gai, si causeur, si remuant, lui l'homme d'esprit par excellence, l'écrivain distingué et correct, le journaliste sans fiel, ni haine, l'ami si dévoué, plein de cœur et de mots encourageants, cet appui des jeunes, lui toujours jeune et toujours brillant... Il est tombé.¹

The effusive tone of the panegyrics which littered the Quebec press following the premature death of Joseph Alfred Norbert Provencher in October 1887 was predictable. French Canada had lost one of its foremost journalists. In recounting the details of his distinguished career, his anguished admirers paid homage to the clarity of his prose, the superiority of his intellect, his prodigious memory, his energy and enthusiasm — traits which set his work apart from the pedestrian efforts of most newspaper reporters.

But the arcane details of one significant episode in his life were silently, if not conveniently, omitted: Provencher's role as "commissaire des Sauvages" in Manitoba between 1873 and 1878.² It is difficult not to believe that this omission arose from the ignominious manner in which he left the

1 Léon Ledieu, "J.A.N. Provencher," *Le Monde Illustré* 12 November 1887, p. 221.

2 Ibid., 222. See also *La Minerve*, 29 October 1887, p. 1; *Le Monde* (Montreal), 29 October 1887, p. 4; *La Presse*, 29 October 1887, p. 2.

government service at the end of that period, a fact which, while not widely publicized, was hardly a state secret. Respect for the recently departed may have been a consideration, of course, but such an excuse cannot be claimed by those who have broached the subject in this century.³ The purpose here, however, is not to tarnish the image of one so revered in a spirit of malicious revisionism, but rather to examine the critical years in the mid-1870s in which the structure of Indian administration was created in Manitoba under the unsteady guidance of Monsieur Provencher.

Provencher was born on 6 January 1843 in Baie-du-Febvre, Lower Canada. His father, a farmer, died when he was young but the generosity of his uncle, the bishop of St. Boniface, enabled him to study in the classical program offered at the Collège de Nicolet. A diligent and capable student, he completed this phase of his education at the age of sixteen. He then moved to Trois-Rivières where he articulated in law. While thus engaged he founded his own newspaper, *La Sentinelle*, which survived for only a few months. His legal studies came to a successful conclusion in 1864, and he was called to the Montreal bar. For a man of intellect, ambition and with a creative disposition a career in law, understandably enough, proved unappealing. Instead, he turned to journalism, a craft which he had already practiced as an enthusiastic amateur.

Provencher was invited to become night editor of *La Minerve*, a leading conservative newspaper. He entered fervently into the vibrant cultural and intellectual life and was one of the founders of *La Revue canadienne*. To this journal he contributed a number of well-received articles on constitutional and economic questions. Among his collaborators in *La Revue* was Joseph Royal, a man of similar background whose career would also lead to the West.

In physical appearance, Provencher was large and ungainly. His generous nose, abundant hair, bushy beard and general unkempt exterior were a cartoonist's delight. This was a bohemian, perhaps, but certainly no peasant, for his tastes were decidedly patrician. Politics, literature and art were his passions, although music left him unmoved. And for good conversation, preferably stimulated by wine, cigars and haute cuisine, there was no substitute. The café subculture of Montreal was the mecca of this gregarious *bon vivant* whose exuberance and infectious good humour won him a wide circle of friends. As one admirer observed: "Il était né pour le boulevard."⁴

3 For example, Donatien Frémont, "Alfred-Norbert Provencher, 1843-1887," *Mémoires de la société Royale du Canada*, Tome 51, Troisième Série, juin 1957 (Ottawa: Imprimé pour la Société Royale du Canada, 1957), 29-41; Kenneth Landry, "Provencher, J.A.N.," in Frances Halpenny, gen. ed., *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. 11, 1881-1980 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 716; A.-G. Morice, O.M.I., *Dictionnaire Historique des Canadiens et des Métis français de l'Ouest* (Québec: Laflamme et Proulx, 1908), 235-36.

4 Henri de Lamothe, quoted in Frémont, "Provencher," 36.

In 1866 Evariste Gélinas resigned as editor-in-chief of *La Minerve* and Provencher succeeded him. But even this rapid advancement was insufficient to satiate the ambition of the young journalist. In the following year Provencher was chosen as the Conservative candidate for Yamaska, a Liberal stronghold, in the first federal election after Confederation. He lost by thirty-eight votes in a contest marred by fraud and intimidation.⁵

To be defeated in politics is not always to be disappointed; the faithful are inevitably compensated, although sometimes in surprising ways. In 1869, Provencher received his reward: he was appointed secretary of the North-West Council. This was the governing body that was to be established in the West when the Hudson's Bay Company lands were transferred to the Dominion on 1 December. The new lieutenant governor of the region, Ontario politician William McDougall, had apparently not been consulted in the selection of the secretary, and there is evidence that he never approved of the candidate chosen.⁶

Nevertheless, Provencher was among McDougall's ill-fated entourage that set out for the West in the autumn of 1869. Passing through American territory, this vanguard of Canadian authority arrived at Pembina on the boundary of the North-West on 30 October. But the Metis of Red River had already resolved to resist incorporation into the Dominion until certain rights were assured, and the Canadians were warned at Pembina not to proceed any further. McDougall was indignant at this rebuff, but accepted the inevitable. Provencher, believing perhaps that his religious and linguistic affinity with the disaffected might render negotiations possible, pressed onwards with McDougall's approval. He got no further than St. Norbert, the Metis headquarters, where he was detained by Louis Riel and his henchmen. He informed his hosts that many local residents representative of the diverse elements in the community would be placed on the North-West Council.⁷ This assurance was insufficient to assuage Metis skepticism and Provencher was advised that the inhabitants of Red River would work out their own arrangements first, and later enter into dialogue with Ottawa. He was then escorted back to the border by armed horsemen.⁸ There the

5 These early details of Provencher's career are gleaned from the articles by Frémont, Landry and Ledieu cited above.

6 Lewis H. Thomas, *The Struggle for Responsible Government in the North-West Territories, 1870-97*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 18. W.L. Morton suggests that Provencher's appointment was in accordance with the usual Canadian custom of balancing English-speaking officeholders with a proportionate number of French-speakers. He noted, however, that Provencher was not a man of McDougall's calibre and that had Prime Minister J.A. Macdonald been better informed of the situation at Red River, a French-Canadian of greater stature would have been selected. "Introduction" to W.L. Morton, ed., *Alexander Begg's Red River Journal and other papers relative to the Red River resistance of 1869-1870* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1956), 43.

7 The council was to have between seven and fifteen members.

8 Thomas, *The Struggle for Responsible Government*, 35.

Canadians lingered for a few months in a futile sojourn while momentous events enveloped Red River.⁹ McDougall and most of his party left for Canada on 18 December but Provencher remained until the end of February. Then he, too, retraced his steps.¹⁰

Another role in the federal service awaited Provencher the following year. He was appointed immigration commissioner in Manitoba with a mandate to encourage French-speaking settlement in the new province. He arrived in Winnipeg on 25 October 1871 to find that a semblance of order had been restored. Armed men no longer barred his way; in fact his welcome was exceedingly cordial. An old friend, Joseph Royal, had already established himself as a leading personage in the community: he was provincial secretary and proprietor of *Le Métis*, the mouthpiece of the Francophone inhabitants.¹¹

Provencher remained in the West until April 1872, attempting to identify suitable locations for the establishment of French-speaking settlements. At the end of this period he was sent to Paris to encourage immigration to Canada from France, neglected for over a century. His joy in undertaking this assignment can only be imagined, since his European destination was the very centre of all he valued highly. And he ensured that his responsibilities did not deprive him of the leisure "de poursuivre des études personnelles, de fréquenter des gens de lettres, de visiter les bibliothèques et les musées, d'admirer les livres rares et les peintures des maîtres."¹²

These delights were brusquely interrupted before even a year had

9 Enos Stutsman, an American lawyer and land speculator, visited the beleaguered McDougall party at Pembina in November and described Provencher as "a pleasant sort of man who had come up altogether wrongly informed regarding this country" and who did not appear to be in McDougall's confidence. Morton, *Alexander Begg's Journal*, 176. Dale Gibson, *Attorney for the Frontier: Enos Stutsman* (Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 1983), 1-7, 117. The details of the Red River resistance are too well known to require repeating here. See G.F.G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), 67-106.

10 Morton, *Alexander Begg's Journal*, 233. The reason for Provencher's extended stay in the West is not clear. It may have been to report to Ottawa on developments at Red River or, as he suggested himself, to assure the Indians of Canadian goodwill. Much of what he reported was either rumour or opinion since he was hardly in an advantageous position to gather intelligence. He seems to have expected contact with Col. J.S. Dennis, who had come to Red River heading a survey party and was still there trying to stir up resistance to Riel among Indians and Canadians. He appeared concerned that he had lost the confidence of the cabinet. National Archives of Canada (NA), MG 26F, Sir Charles Tupper Papers, vol. 3, p. 1385, Provencher to C. Tupper, 24 January 1870, p. 1404, Provencher to Tupper, 3 February 1870.

11 Royal's newspaper was not sparing in its praise for the new immigration commissioner: "Par ses hautes capacités et son intelligence pratique, M. Provencher est éminemment propre à l'importante tâche dont l'a chargé le gouvernement d'Ottawa." *Le Métis*, vol. 1, no. 21, 26 October 1871, p. 2, "sans titre."

12 Frémont, "Provencher," 36.

passed. Early in 1873 Provencher learned that he had been appointed commissioner of Indian affairs in Manitoba and that the Red River Valley would once more become his home. A salary of \$2,000 and considerable prestige went with the position; he would be the principal official of the federal Indian Department in the prairie West.¹³ And yet it can only have been with heavy heart that he abandoned the boulevards of Paris for the mud of Main Street, where wooden sidewalks were still a rare luxury.

The vacancy in Manitoba was created by the resignation, in January 1873, of the incumbent commissioner, Wemyss Simpson. Simpson had presided at the signing of Treaties 1 and 2 in 1871, and since then had served the Indian Department in administering those agreements on a part-time basis. In October 1872, the Manitoba Executive Council urged the appointment of a permanent commissioner who would reside in Winnipeg throughout the year. Ottawa concurred and when Simpson, who had business interests in Sault Ste. Marie, was asked to devote himself fully to the job, he resigned.¹⁴

Provencher arrived in Manitoba to take up his new posting on 2 June. Shortly afterwards he was named a lieutenant colonel of the militia; the title was purely honorary and was designed to lend him an aura of authority when dealing with the Indians.¹⁵ His headquarters were in Winnipeg, a thriving garrison town and government centre. Its population was less than 3,000 at the time, but it was growing rapidly as new settlers swarmed in, mainly from Ontario. The unpaved streets and wooden buildings were unimpressive, but the lively hotels and saloons meant that it was anything but a dull place.¹⁶

Nor was the Indian Department an impressive operation. There was one employee in addition to Provencher, Molyneux St. John. St. John had been

13 NA, RG 10, Records of the Department of Indian Affairs, vol. 3583, f. 1084 Pt. 2, Lt. Gov. Alexander Morris to Joseph Howe, secretary of state for the provinces, 26 October 1872; Howe to W. Simpson, 12 November 1872; Simpson to Howe, 29 November 1872. Ibid., vol. 3590, f. 1356, Simpson to Howe, 27 January 1873. This file also contains the order in council of 28 February 1873 (No. 229) accepting Simpson's resignation and appointing Provencher in his place.

14 NA, RG 10, Records of the Department of Indian Affairs, vol. 3583, f. 1084 Pt. 2, Lt. Gov. Alexander Morris to Joseph Howe, secretary of state for the provinces, 26 October 1872; Howe to W. Simpson, 12 November 1872; Simpson to Howe, 29 November 1872. Ibid., vol. 3590, f. 1356, Simpson to Howe, 27 January 1873. This file also contains the order in council of 28 February 1873 (No. 229) accepting Simpson's resignation and appointing Provencher in his place.

15 Frémont, "Provencher," 37. See also *Le Métis*, vol. 3, no. 2, 7 juin 1873, p. 2, "Nouveau Commissaire des Sauvages" and "Nouvelles Canadiennes." Royal's newspaper was as enthusiastic as ever: "M. Provencher a déjà beaucoup étudié le Nord Ouest et ses connaissances et ses talents nous assurent des services précieux."

16 W.L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 166-71.

present at the treaty negotiations of 1871 and styled himself "Indian agent."¹⁷ These two men formed the nucleus of a bureaucracy that would grow inexorably in the decades that followed, until the lives of all Indians in Manitoba and the North-West were circumscribed by its dictates. Initially, however, its responsibilities merely extended to the signatories of Treaties 1 and 2.

The arrival of the new commissioner in Manitoba coincided with a major reorganization of federal administrative structures relating to the West. In July the Department of the Interior was created and it took over the management of Dominion Lands and Indian affairs, matters which until then had been within the purview of the Department of the Secretary of State. The first minister of the Interior was Senator Alexander Campbell, although his term of office was short-lived.¹⁸ When the Liberals came to power some months later, David Laird, a newspaper man from Prince Edward Island, was given responsibility for the interior portfolio.

The government was also giving thought to the structure most appropriate for Indian administration in the West, since the superintendency system of Quebec and Ontario was not considered suitable.¹⁹ An order in council of 16 June authorized the establishment of a Board of Indian Commissioners for Manitoba and the North-West Territories composed of the lieutenant governor, the resident Indian commissioner, and the chief officer of the Dominion Lands Granting Department in Winnipeg.²⁰ The Board was to determine the general policy with respect to Indians in the West under instructions from Ottawa, although routine administration was to be the prerogative of the resident commissioner, Provencher.²¹

This meant that Provencher would have to work closely with Lieutenant Governor Alexander Morris. Had a mutual respect developed between the

17 When Molyneux St. John heard of Provencher's appointment, he expressed some resentment at being passed over for the position himself. NA RG 10, vol. 3603, f. 1987, M. St. John to W. Spragge, deputy superintendent general of Indian Affairs, 30 May 1873.

18 Thomas, *The Struggle for Responsible Government*, 60-61.

19 Joseph Howe suggested that the administrative machinery in use in the older provinces would be inappropriate because of the formidable distances involved and because missionary work in the West had not been proportionate to the "mass of ignorance and pagan superstition to be encountered." *Report of the Department of Secretary of State, Indian Branch, for the year ending 30 June 1872*, p. 2.

20 The Dominion Lands officer was Lindsay Russell and he refused to serve on the Indian Board. His place was taken by S.J. Dawson of the Public Works Department. *Report of the Interior for the year ended 30 June 1874*, report of Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, Lawrence Vankoughnet, p. 8.

21 Thomas, *The Struggle for Responsible Government*, 69. A similar structure was authorized for British Columbia at the same time. In that province, however, Lieutenant Governor Joseph Trutch refused to serve on the Board and the direction of policy was left in the hands of I.W. Powell and James Lenihan, the principal officers of the Indian Department. NA, RG 10, vol. 3625, f. 5506, memorandum of David Laird, 11 October 1875.

two men, the Board might have functioned effectively. But it was quite the opposite. Provencher ignored Morris after he had established himself in Winnipeg, and only called upon the lieutenant governor when asked to do so. Morris's fragile sense of dignity was thus offended and the relationship was a strained one thereafter. When Chief Henry Prince of St. Peter's Reserve complained that the commissioner had not kept an appointment with himself and his Indians, Morris eagerly forwarded the letter to Ottawa adding, "This sort of thing cannot go on, and we are really with Provencher, as compared with his predecessor, 'out of the frying pan into the fire'."²²

It irritated Morris that he was obliged to work with a man who failed to display an appropriate defence to the representative of the Queen and who appeared to be shouldering his responsibilities rather lightly. The Indian Board as a triumvirate of equals was unacceptable to him as he might be outvoted by subordinate officers. Were he, as lieutenant governor, declared head of the Board with veto powers, it might be a workable arrangement. He also felt that the responsibilities of the Board should be confined to administering the terms of existing treaties; new treaties should be negotiated by special commissioners appointed for the occasion, possibly from the membership of the North-West Council.²³

Because of Morris's objections, the Indian Board never functioned properly. The lieutenant governor relied for advice on matters of general policy on the North-West Council; Provencher's role was limited mainly to fulfilling the terms of treaties already agreed to. With the exception of Treaty 3, Provencher played no part in the negotiation of the treaties conducted by Morris between 1873 and 1876.²⁴

The failure of the Board of Indian Commissioners convinced Interior Minister Laird that it would be best abolished and a system of superintendencies and agencies created in its stead. By October 1875 he and his advisers had devised a scheme whereby the prairie region would be divided into two superintendencies. The Manitoba Superintendency, with its headquarters in Winnipeg, was to contain the area encompassed by Treaties 1, 2, and 5 and in addition, that part of Treaty 3 not included in Ontario when

22 NA, RG 10, vol. 3590, f. 1356, A. Morris to A. Campbell, 26 June 1873. Provencher was reprimanded for his dereliction of duty. *Ibid.*, vol. 3603, f. 2118 1/2, Provencher to Ottawa, 10 July 1873.

23 *Ibid.*, vol. 3605, f. 2903, A. Morris to A. Campbell, 23 June 1873; *ibid.*, f. 2946, Morris to Laird, 24 January 1874.

24 While Morris wished to have no role in mundane administrative matters associated with the Indian Department such as the requisition and distribution of supplies, he tried to establish himself in the role of watchdog or ombudsman in order to ensure that the Indians received what was due them. His willingness to listen to the complaints of Indians was resented by Provencher, who felt that this resulted in manipulation and undermined his ability to make tough decisions. NA, MG 27 1 C 8, Alexander Morris Papers, p. 556, Provencher to Morris, 7 July 1875.

the provincial boundaries were settled. The North-West Superintendency was to be confined initially to the area of Treaty 4, but would later extend its jurisdiction to lands ceded in subsequent treaties between Manitoba and the Rockies. Its headquarters were to be located in the capital of the North-West Territories, when that site was selected. Up to five Indian agents were to be appointed in each superintendency. Laird's plan was approved by an order in council of 7 December and it was instituted at the beginning of 1876.²⁵

Morris objected vehemently to the new arrangements, preferring the Indian Board with veto powers accruing to himself. He pointed out that Indians insisted on taking their grievances to the lieutenant governor as the chief representative of the Crown. If all authority in such matters was now transferred to the superintendent, great difficulties and embarrassment would arise. So insistent was he in advancing this view that Laird felt it expedient, although with "serious misgivings," to seek a compromise. An order in council of 12 May 1876 granted Morris the honorary title of chief superintendent of Indian affairs in Manitoba, with power to receive deputations of Indians bearing grievances and the right to examine books and documents relating to Indian administration in the hands of the "local superintendent." Provencher had to content himself with the title of acting superintendent of Indian affairs in Manitoba, a designation he retained until his departure from the department.²⁶

The Board of Indian Commissioners, then, never functioned as intended by its creators. Its only accomplishment, working as a unit, appears to have been Treaty 3. Towards the end of September 1873, the Board members, Morris, Provencher, and S.J. Dawson, made their way to the North-West Angle of Lake of the Woods to negotiate a treaty with its Ojibwa inhabitants. These Indians had refused to give up their lands in 1871 and 1872. The area in question was critical to the success of the Dominion's expansionist designs: it contained the Dawson road and the route of the planned Pacific railway. It also contained fertile land and, it was believed, mineral wealth. In all, 55,000 square miles of territory were at stake.

Because of the importance of the region and the fact that the Indians were reluctant to part with their lands, the terms offered were considerably more generous than those offered in Treaties 1 and 2. Annuities of \$5 per capita were proposed rather than \$3, and reserves of one square mile per family of five rather than 160 acres. Nevertheless, the negotiations were difficult and protracted. Gifts of cattle, implements and grain were promised by the

25 NA, MG 27 1 D 10, David Laird Papers, Letterbook 1875-76, Laird to Morris, 10 December 1875. See also, NA, RG 10, vol. 3625, f. 5506, memorandum of D. Laird, 11 October 1875. The system of superintendencies was also created in British Columbia at this time.

26 NA RG 10, vol. 3625, f. 5506, Morris to Laird, 18 February 1876; *ibid.*, vol. 3634, f. 6464, order in council, 12 May 1876, No. 420; confidential memorandum, 11 January 1877 (probably by L. Vankoughnet). See also, Thomas, *The Struggle for Responsible Government*, 70-71.

commissioners as additional inducements to the recalcitrant. And, at Provencher's suggestion, an annual grant of ammunition and twine to the value of \$1,500 was offered. The commissioners also agreed that the chiefs be given medals made of silver, whereas base metal had been used in the medals of the earlier treaties. By 5 October the reticence of the Indians had faded and Treaty 3 was signed.²⁷

This was the only treaty at which Provencher officiated. He would, however, be responsible for fulfilling Ottawa's obligations under a number of these agreements, and his thoughts on the subject are therefore worth recording. Provencher accepted that treaties were necessary because of the Native title to the soil based on occupancy. He believed that when these agreements were entered into in future, the government ought to determine precisely the terms beforehand, thereby avoiding the charade of negotiations between equal partners. But Ottawa's obligations should not end with the signing and gift giving; to abandon the Indians at this stage would condemn them to the status of a mendicant class. Rather, an active program of civilization should be pursued. Attaching the Natives to agriculture was the key to releasing them from dependency upon public charity. Equipment, animals and instruction would therefore have to be supplied, but it should be done cautiously in order to avoid "useless expense." The appointment of local agents would provide the constant supervision required in this program.²⁸

There was nothing particularly original in what Provencher proposed. The promotion of civilization and economic self-sufficiency through agriculture and education had been going on in central Canada long before Confederation. Nonetheless, the commissioner's observations outlined the general principles of the policy that was to be applied in the West in succeeding decades.

Estimating, ordering and distributing the supplies to which the Indians were entitled under the treaties were Provencher's principal responsibilities as commissioner. These seemingly mundane tasks were complicated by a number of factors. No census of the Indian populations in question existed at the time, nor was one carried out in those early years. The number of Indians present at the original treaty signing was an unreliable guide. New adherents to the agreements continued to turn up at the annual treaty day

27 Alexander Morris, *The Treaties of Canada with the Indians of Manitoba and the North-West Territories* (1880; reprint, Toronto: Coles Publishing, 1971), 45-65. See also, NA, MG 29 C67, S.J. Dawson Papers, "Notes on Proceedings of the N.W. Angle Indian Treaty." In fact, before embarking on the negotiations, Interior Minister Campbell authorized Morris to offer up to \$7.00 in annuities should it be necessary to secure adhesion. Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM), MG 12 B2 K, Alexander Morris Papers; 38, A. Campbell to A. Morris, 5 August 1873.

28 Report of the Department of the Interior for the year ended 30 June 1874, report of Provencher, 31 December 1873, pp. 55-57.

payments for several years. They claimed not only annuities, but arrears on the same.²⁹

To make matters worse, an undetermined number of mixed bloods were resident on reserves and had the option of either participating in the Metis land settlement provision of the Manitoba Act, or choosing Indian status. This choice had to be made, however, prior to the treaty payments of 1874. Those accepting annuities from the federal government in that year came under the jurisdiction of the Indian Department and were excluded from the Metis land grant scheme.³⁰

In the years immediately following the signing of Treaties 1, 2 and 3, the Indians complained frequently at the tardiness with which the government was fulfilling its obligations. The supply of tools and livestock, for instance, was but a trickle.³¹ The ponderous pace was deliberate; Ottawa's policy was to supply goods to the Indians only when they were ready to use them. Rumours that ploughs and harrows granted in 1874 had been bartered illegally by their recipients were hardly encouraging. Until such time as local agents were in place to take custody of such equipment, the department was reluctant to incur much expenditure.³²

A further source of Indian grievance was the sluggish speed with which their reserves were laid out. Surveys had been delayed until Provencher's arrival in Manitoba in 1873. Most bands had selected the location of their reserves, but until surveys were completed, the precise limits of their property would remain in question. Squatters were taking advantage of this ambiguity by settling on lands claimed by Indians or helping themselves to the timber resources. The surveys did proceed and by 1877 Provencher was able to report that they were completed or almost so for the reserves under Treaties 1 and 2.³³

One of the most persistent difficulties that plagued Indian administration in Manitoba during Provencher's incumbency was that of the "outside promises" — a list of goods contained in a memorandum attached to the written terms of Treaties 1 and 2 and offered to the Indians as an inducement

29 Ibid., p. 54. Payments made to Indians in Treaties 1 and 2 amounted to \$8,913 in 1871; \$16,905 in 1872; and \$14,169 in 1873. The estimate for 1874 was \$18,780.

30 Ibid., p. 54. See also NA, RG 10, vol. 1922, f. 2970, Provencher to Laird, 20 July 1875; Laird to Provencher, 13 August 1875.

31 NA, RG 10, vol. 3613, f. 4057, Henry Prince to Laird, 28 September 1874.

32 Ibid., vol. 1966, f. 5111, Department of the Interior (Ottawa) to Provencher, 26 July 1875.

33 Report of the Department of the Interior for the year ended 30 June 1877, report of Provencher, 1 February 1877, p. 37 (this should have been in the 1876 *Annual Report* but Provencher did not submit it on time; thus, two of his reports appear in the 1877 volume); report of Provencher, 10 October 1877, p. 39. See also, NA, RG 10, vol. 3603, f. 2120, Provencher to W. Spragge, deputy superintendent general of Indian affairs, 5 July 1873; Spragge to Provencher, 18 July 1873.

to sign.³⁴ The value of these goods — clothes, buggies, livestock and agricultural implements — was not great considering what the Indians had surrendered in return. Ottawa, however, was reluctant to fulfill these promises arguing that they were not officially part of the treaties.

By the time Provencher was appointed commissioner, two years had elapsed since the signing of the treaties and little had been done about the outside promises. He found upon his arrival in Manitoba that there was widespread dissatisfaction among the Indians as a result. Chiefs, such as Henry Prince, refused to accept their treaty money and payment time dragged on for several days in some instances because of the heated discussion.³⁵ Prince (also known as Red Eagle) was arguably the most prominent Native leader in the province and was respected by the federal authorities. Head of the Saulteaux Band at St. Peter's, he was a son of the legendary Chief Peguis. In 1869 Prince had opposed Riel's government at Red River and had even volunteered to assist Ottawa in suppressing it.³⁶ He was not a man who could easily be ignored.

As the substantially more generous terms offered in Treaty 3 became known to Manitoba Natives, their sense of grievance grew accordingly. Provencher and Morris, cognizant of the tide of discontent lapping at their doorsteps, urged their masters in Ottawa to provide at least some supplementary benefits lest Indians begin to withdraw from the treaties.³⁷

The government was predictably slow in responding. But when Laird visited the West during the summer of 1874, he experienced the intensity of Native disenchantment personally.³⁸ He gave the matter further consideration over the following winter and in April 1875 he was finally ready to act. At that time he recommended that the outside promises be regarded as integral parts of Treaties 1 and 2 and that they be fulfilled. He also proposed

34 The outside promises were as follows: A suit of clothes and a buggy for each chief and two councillors; a bull for each reserve and a cow for each chief; a boar for each reserve and a sow for each chief; a male and female of each type of farm animal for every chief; a plough and harrow for each settler cultivating the land. The memorandum containing these promises was signed by A. Archibald, J. McKay, W. Simpson and M. St. John. NA, RG 10, vol. 3621, f. 4767, D. Laird to the Governor-General-in-Council, 27 April 1875.

35 Report of the Department of the Interior for the year ended 30 June 1874, report of Provencher, 31 December 1873, p. 55. See also, NA, RG 10, vol. 3603, f. 2118 1/2, Provencher to W. Spragge, 16 July 1873.

36 Chief Albert Edward Thompson, *Chief Peguis and His Descendants* (Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1973), 35-38.

37 NA, RG 10, vol. 3608, F. 3117, "Resolution adopted by the Board of Indian Commissioners at Government House, Fort Garry, 13 March 1874"; *ibid.*, vol. 3607, f. 3008, Provencher to Laird, 21 April 1874.

38 *Ibid.*, vol. 3613, f. 4058, "Memorandum of a conference held on the 15th of August 1874 between the Honourable the Minister of the Interior, and certain Indians residing on the Brokenhead River Reserve."

that the annuities be raised from \$3 to \$5. An order in council of 30 April 1875 endorsed these proposals.³⁹

Provencher and Morris were informed of this decision and were asked to secure the Indians' agreement to the new terms. This they accomplished before the year was out, all bands signifying their satisfaction with the revised treaties, with one exception.⁴⁰

The annuity increase became effective immediately; the other promises were not so forthcoming. Provencher believed that there was no urgency in supplying the livestock and implements contained in the agreement, and once again the funereal plodding which characterized all of the department's transactions made itself conspicuous.⁴¹ Morris, however, was indignant at the procrastination and urged on a number of occasions that the terms be fulfilled to the letter without delay.⁴² These were futile gestures, it seems:⁴³ the department's pathological abhorrence at spending money on Indians, in spite of agreements entered into, could not easily be cast aside.⁴⁴

This parsimony was reflected in the manpower allocated to Indian administration in the West. While Native people in the twentieth century would complain of the burgeoning army of bureaucrats that directed their lives, in the 1870s it was quite the opposite. The entire Manitoba operation was in the hands of Provencher and one assistant, Molyneux St. John. When

39 Ibid., vol. 3621, f. 4767, Laird to the Governor-General-in-Council, 27 April 1875; order in council No. 427, 30 April 1875.

40 Morris, *Treaties*, 126-32. The Portage Band under Chief Yellow Quill was the troublesome exception. These Indians were dissatisfied with the size of their reserve and dissident groups opposed the leadership of the chief. In the following year they split into three bands, were given separate reserves, and eventually accepted the revised treaty terms.

41 NA, RG 10, vol. 3621, f. 4767, Provencher to the minister of the Interior, 2 December 1876.

42 Ibid., Morris to the minister of the Interior, 26 October 1876. Morris noted that he had given his personal pledge to the Indians in 1875 that the new terms would be strictly adhered to, "but I regret to say that another season has been allowed to pass without any effort to carry out the new promises, and I am exposed to reproaches from the Indians on this account."

43 Ibid., Commissioner Edgar Dewdney to the superintendent general of Indian affairs, 24 April 1880. Dewdney observed that the outside promises did not appear to have been carried out and that the Indians were still discontented. The St. Peter's Indians, for example, had received very few of the working cattle they were promised. Thirteen had been delivered, of which twelve were still alive and there were continual disputes about who should use them. There were plenty of ploughs on the reserve, but not enough *animals to work them*.

44 One problem that the department did attend to with some success in the mid-1870s was that posed by the Sioux. These refugees from American territory had arrived at Red River in 1862-63 and those who remained north of the boundary were perceived as a potential menace to settlers. The government refused to let them participate in the treaties, but in 1875 and 1877 they were granted reserves at Oak River, Bird Tail Creek and Pipestone Creek. See G.F.G. Stanley, "Displaced Red Men: The Sioux in Canada," in I.A.L. Getty and Donald B. Smith, eds., *One Century Later: Western Canadian Reserve Indians Since Treaty 7* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1978), 61-68.

St. John resigned in May 1875 Provencher was obliged to engage the services of James F. Graham of the Dominion Survey on a temporary basis. Graham's appointment as clerk in the Winnipeg office was not confirmed by Ottawa until February 1876.⁴⁵

Nor were the physical facilities available of an elaborate nature. The Indian office was located in a poorly heated Winnipeg house. Provencher lived in the rooms not needed for departmental business — the sitting room, dining room, kitchen and bedroom. During the intense cold of the winter, only the bedroom was suitable for occupation. As department accountant Robert Sinclair observed upon visiting the West, "indeed it would be difficult to conceive of more comfortless quarters than those offered by the official premises in winter."⁴⁶

Provencher complained frequently of being understaffed and overworked. And he claimed that his office routine was constantly interrupted by delegations of Indians seeking interviews. There was undoubtedly an element of truth in these assertions, but ultimately they failed to convince department headquarters that there were no serious problems with the management of the Winnipeg office.⁴⁷ Sinclair noticed with some concern that accounts were not always accurately kept. And evidence that the lowest tenders for supplies were not always accepted raised doubts of a more serious nature in his mind. In a memorandum to the minister on 2 April 1875 he pointed out the possibility of abuse in the prevailing financial arrangements. Large sums of money were placed to Provencher's credit in a Winnipeg bank and he could draw cheques on them as he pleased. These funds could be converted to the commissioner's own use "if he were so disposed." Rather than allowing Provencher to deal with local merchants directly, as had hitherto been the case, Sinclair proposed that all accounts be sent to headquarters for approval and payment. These new arrangements became effective on 1 July 1875. Provencher protested at the inconvenience and delay that this would entail, but in vain.⁴⁸

45 NA, RG 10, vol. 3622, f. 4879, Provencher to the minister of the Interior, 13 May 1875; memorandum of D. Laird, 5 June 1875; Provencher to the minister of the Interior, 9 December 1875; *ibid.*, vol. 3627, f. 5946, R. Sinclair to E.A. Meredith, deputy minister of the Interior, 5 April 1876.

46 *Ibid.*, vol. 3627, f. 5972, R. Sinclair to Laird, 29 January 1876. It could be argued, of course, that in comparison with the cabins then being constructed by the Indians on their reserves, Provencher's accommodation was palatial.

47 Royal's newspaper persisted in proclaiming that all was well. In reporting on a visit of Interior Minister Laird to Provencher's office in October 1874, it announced: "La manière économique, systématique, régulière et intelligente avec laquelle le Col. Provencher a organisé ce bureau depuis son arrivée dans le pays doit être un sujet de félicitations pour l'Hon. M. Laird et pour le titulaire." *Le Métis*, vol. 4, no. 17, 3 October 1874, p. 3. "Nouvelles locales."

48 NA, RG 10, vol. 3621, f. 4719, Sinclair to Laird, 2 April 1875; headquarters to Provencher, 22 April 1875; Provencher to Laird, 7 May 1875; memorandum of Sinclair, 30 May 1875. Provencher was allowed a contingency fund of \$600.

The commissioner's administrative ineptitude remained a source of growing concern in Ottawa. In December 1875 Laird confessed to Morris that he was anxious to get rid of Provencher. "Not that I have anything personal against the man," he observed, "but he is generally unfit for the position. ... I need scarcely ask your opinion as to his unsuitableness. The difficulty is to know what to do with the man."⁴⁹

A closer scrutiny of Provencher's *modus operandi* was called for; perhaps the situation could be salvaged without the removal of the incumbent. At Laird's insistence, Sinclair spent a week in Winnipeg early in 1876 examining procedures in the Indian office. His accountant's eye for detail was appalled at the disarray that lay before him. No ledger records of the monies disbursed in annuities during the previous year had been kept. And records of other expenditures — provisions, seed grain, implements and cattle — were more in the nature of memoranda than of regular accounts. Such procedures were "very objectionable and unbusiness like." As Sinclair reported to Laird:

However good Mr. Provencher may be as an administrator of Indian Affairs there can be no possible doubt as to his incapacity as a mere office man for he is destitute of regular and methodical business habits of application and is most erratic in his manner of transacting business affairs.

The accountant laid out specific instructions on the procedures of record-keeping that were to be followed from then on and which might help Provencher to manage in spite of "his total ignorance of even the simplest method of bookkeeping." The commissioner, or acting superintendent as he was now called, admitted his shortcomings in such matters.

While in Winnipeg, Sinclair called upon Morris and discovered that the lieutenant governor was "not by any means favourably impressed by Mr. Provencher's administrative ability as an Indian agent even while admitting his talent as a writer." Morris's contention that Provencher was misplaced in his present position was not, however, readily accepted by Sinclair. The accountant observed that the acting superintendent was able to deal firmly with Indians while maintaining their esteem. Sinclair left the West recommending strongly the appointment of a permanent efficient clerk in the Winnipeg office and local agents in different parts of the superintendency.⁵⁰

The appointment of agents had long been advocated by Provencher and in 1876 this recommendation was finally acted upon. In June of that year three agents were provisionally appointed, one each for the St. Peter's area,

49 NA, Laird Papers, Letterbook 1875-1876, Laird to Morris, 10 December 1875.

50 NA, RG 10, vol. 3627, f. 5972, Sinclair to Laird, 29 January, 3 February and 4 February 1876; Sinclair to Provencher, 14 February 1876.

Treaty 2, and the North-West Angle. This experiment proved satisfactory and in May 1877 the appointments were confirmed and three additional agents were also hired.⁵¹ The Indians themselves had been demanding agents for some time and Provencher believed that the appointments would remove many of their pretexts for complaining. And there would be a further advantage: "Their (the Indians') frequent visits to this office have been a source of great annoyance for the population of the city and its surroundings, and of demoralization for the Indians." They would now see their agents in all matters.⁵²

As already alluded to, in 1876 the prairie region was divided into two superintendencies. In October, David Laird resigned his cabinet post and seat in Parliament to become lieutenant governor and Indian superintendent of the North-West Territories.⁵³ His successor as minister of the Interior was David Mills, a prominent Ontario Liberal.

This was also the year in which existing Indian legislation was revised and consolidated in the new Indian Act — a comprehensive piece of legislation which confirmed the Indians' status as minors and wards of the state, imposed restrictions on their civil liberties and created a mechanism whereby they could cast off these disabilities.⁵⁴ It was assumed that the Native peoples would ultimately acquire full citizenship, but that could only take place when they had become "civilized" — a transformation which would make them culturally indistinguishable from the white population. Agriculture and education were viewed by the authorities as the key mechanisms whereby this transformation would be effected.

Agriculture was not promoted with any great vigour or consistency on Manitoba reserves during the 1870s. Although his father had been a farmer, Provencher himself knew little about tilling the soil. Nor does the available

51 The three original appointees were as follows: Dr. David Young, located at St. Peter's, was responsible for the Indians of that reserve and also those of Fort Alexander and Brokenhead River; H. Martineau, located at Oak Point, supervised the Lake Manitoba bands; George McPherson, located at Assabaskang, was in charge of the Lake of the Woods area. McPherson actually shared the Treaty 3 Indians with Robert Pither, an agent who had been stationed at Thunder Bay for a number of years. Only one of the new agents was appointed on a full-time basis: Willoughby Clarke. With headquarters at Norway House, he supervised the Treaty 5 Indians. Francis Ogletree, at Portage la Prairie, was given charge of the Yellow Quill, Short Bear and Riding Mountain bands; George Newcombe, the Dominion Lands agent at Emerson, became responsible for the Roseau River band. The full-time agents received annual salaries of \$1,000; Ogletree's remuneration was \$300 and Newcombe's \$150. NA, RG 10, vol. 3648, f. 8162 — 1, order in council No. 476, 11 May 1877; Provencher to the minister of the Interior, 7 June 1877. See also, *Report of the Department of the Interior for the year ended 30 June 1877*, xii.

52 *Report of the Department of the Interior for the year ended 30 June 1877*, report of Provencher, 10 October 1877, p. 40.

53 John W. Chalmers, *Laird of the West* (Calgary: Detselig, 1981), 61-64.

54 The Indian Act, 1876. S.C. 1876, c. 18. (39 Vict.).

evidence suggest that the agents appointed in 1876 and 1877 were experienced agriculturalists. Provencher, in fact, did not regard knowledge of farming as a necessary qualification for the job. Nor did he see any need to instruct the Indians in their new way of life: their reserves were sufficiently close to white settlement for them to observe agriculture and industry for themselves. And he believed that the government was under no obligation to establish model farms or mills: once the Indians received the stipulated number of livestock and implements, the rest would be up to them.⁵⁵

According to Provencher, the Indians practiced a "rather primitive system of agriculture," cultivating small plots rather than entire fields. Sustenance could still be obtained from fishing and the chase: tillage was a supplementary activity. Nevertheless, when the harvest of 1875 was destroyed by grasshoppers, considerable hardship ensued and the department was obliged to distribute emergency provisions.⁵⁶ This suggests that reserve residents were developing some dependency on the products of the soil. And their constant protests at the tardiness with which they were given the animals and implements promised in the treaties is one indication that they were serious about adapting to the sedentary way of life.⁵⁷

The Indians were also generally supportive of schooling for their children. Indeed education was one of the services offered to them in the treaties, and it is likely that they wished the younger generation to acquire the skills of the whites in order to survive in the new order. There were four reserve schools in operation in the year of Provencher's appointment as "commissaire des Sauvages."⁵⁸ This number steadily increased until it reached nineteen in 1877.⁵⁹ These were primitive one-room, one-teacher institutions: it was not until the following decade that the more elaborate

55 *Report of the Department of the Interior for the year ended 30 June 1875*, report of Provencher, 30 October 1875, pp. 32-33.

56 NA, RG10, vol. 3623, f. 5091, Provencher to the minister of the Interior, 4 November 1875. Sarah Carter's *Lost Harveys: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990) bears out this contention in a larger context.

57 A tabular statement giving agricultural statistics does not appear in the annual report of the department until 1877 and even then, figures for the Manitoba and North-West superintendencies appear to be lumped together. "Progress," therefore, is difficult to discern. In Provencher's report for 1875, he mentioned that the St. Peter's and Fort Alexander bands were cultivating 2,000 and 1,000 acres respectively. No other bands were sufficiently involved in agriculture to merit statistical reference. *Report of the Department of the Interior for the year ended 30 June 1875*, report of Provencher, 30 October 1875, pp. 38-39.

58 *Report of the Department of the Interior for the year ended 30 June 1874*, report of Provencher, 31 December 1873, p. 58. The schools referred to were at St. Peter's, Fort Alexander, Pembina, and Fairford.

59 *Report of the Department of the Interior for the year ended 30 June 1877*, report of L. Vankoughnet, p. 7.

boarding and industrial schools would appear. In fact, Provencher believed that industrial schools would not work in the West, at least at this stage.⁶⁰

The department showed little initiative in promoting education. Schools were invariably established at the instigation of missionaries, the Anglicans and Catholics being particularly active. The Indians of the reserve on which a school was to be opened, of course, had to be supportive of the idea. The Brokenhead River Indians, for example, were steadfast in their paganism and opposed a school as an insidious instrument of proselytism.⁶¹ Teachers in reserve schools were usually missionaries or their nominees; their salaries, around \$300 per annum, were paid by the department.

While the Indians persisted in a nomadic or seminomadic way of life, school attendance was understandably irregular and erratic. Provencher observed, however, that even when the parents were settled the problems did not evaporate. During the long Manitoba winters the bitter cold, lack of proper clothing, and the distance to school all contributed to a high absentee rate.⁶²

Provencher considered education as an essential accoutrement of successful adaptation to a sedentary existence; but it was not necessarily the agent of cultural annihilation. Teachers in reserve schools should know the native tongue spoken by the children, he believed, so that they might give readily intelligible explanations. Nor was he sympathetic with the view that Indian languages ought to be obliterated:

Now, if we go back to philosophical, ethnographical and historical reasons, we have the right to enquire whether every language has not its reasons to subsist, and whether it is the duty of a civilizing Government to use its influence to extinguish a language spoken by thousands, — a language well-formed, and well adapted for its purposes; the study of which may one day contribute to throw light on the darkest and most interesting points in the history of half a world.⁶³

These were enlightened views for the age. Such sentiments were rarely heard from the generation of officials and missionaries that arrived in the West during the 1880s determined to accelerate the process of civilization.

The makeshift approach that characterized department policy in agriculture and education was also evident in its dealings with Native health problems. Hunger was an ever-present fact of life for many Indians: its spectre appeared whenever crops, fishing or hunting failed — and this

60 *Report of the Department of the Interior for the year ended 30 June 1875*, report of Provencher, 30 October 1875, p. 26.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 36. Provencher was fluently bilingual in English and French and saw no reason why Indians could not acquire one of the official languages while retaining their own.

happened frequently enough. Fearful that a dependency upon its largesse might develop, the government only interfered "in cases of unusual destitution."⁶⁴ Relief measures were sufficient to prevent death by starvation, but not to restore the afflicted to good health. Weakened by a diet that was often inadequate, many Indians were in poor shape to resist the ravages of new diseases introduced by settlers. When Dr. J.S. Lynch visited St. Peter's Reserve in March 1875 he was shocked to discover "so large a number of consumptive cases, spinal diseases and other serious chronic complaints — scarcely a family without a bed-ridden invalid."⁶⁵ It appears that nothing was done about these problems; health care was a private, not a public concern.

Epidemics, of course, were another matter. In fact, Lynch's visit to St. Peter's was precipitated by an outbreak of measles. As Provencher reported to his minister, prompt action had to be taken to deal with the pestilence, lest it spread to adjoining settlements.⁶⁶ Likewise, when a smallpox epidemic afflicted the Icelandic colony in the newly created District of Keewatin in the autumn of 1876, swift measures were again called for. Provencher was a member of the Council of Keewatin which tried to control the contagion by establishing a quarantine around the area. Nevertheless, the malady reached a number of Native communities and forty Indians perished from it. Food, medicine, physicians' fees, and the cost of replacing infected possessions brought the department's share in dealing with this emergency to \$9,000 — an "extravagance" in the opinion of Interior Minister David Mills.⁶⁷

Crises of this nature were rare enough and Provencher was able to keep his office functioning at a relatively leisurely pace;⁶⁸ this was especially true when James Graham's appointment as clerk in the Winnipeg office was confirmed and agents were placed in a number of locations.⁶⁹ Hunting was one of Provencher's passions and Indians protested at his frequent absences in pursuit of this pastime.⁷⁰ Nor did the coarse environment prevent him

64 NA, RG 10, vol. 3616, f. 4540, headquarters to Provencher, 15 April 1875.

65 Ibid., vol. 3621, f. 4723, Dr. J.S. Lynch to Provencher, 8 March 1875.

66 Ibid., Provencher to the minister of the Interior, 6 April 1875.

67 Report of the Department of the Interior for the year ended 30 June 1877, report of David Mills, xi-xii; report of Provencher, p. 38.

68 In fact, Lieutenant Governor Morris was continuing to receive complaints from Indians about Provencher's neglect of his duties and he never hesitated to make his displeasure known. For example, PAM, MG 12 B1, Alexander Morris Papers, Letterbook M: p. 52, Morris to Provencher, 21 October 1876; p. 57, Morris to Provencher, 4 November 1876; p. 105, Morris to Provencher, 14 March 1877.

69 In fact, in May 1876 Provencher was granted a month's leave of absence. He made his way back to Quebec where he married Marie-Louise Delagrave. Two children were born of the union: Norbert, who died at a young age, and Louise. See Frémont, "Provencher," p. 38; NA, MG 30 D1, F.J. Audet's Biographical Notes, vol. 25, pp. 477-78.

from attempting to recreate some semblance of the café life that he had once enjoyed in Montreal and Paris. Au Grand Vatel, a French restaurant, was located near his Winnipeg residence and he became one of its habitués. There he would gather with his friends in the evenings; liquor flowed and witty conversation was conjured up.⁷¹ *Le bonheur* was not destined to last: Ottawa had silently endured Provencher's administrative incompetence over the years, but by 1877 its patience was on the verge of exhaustion. Indeed, incompetence was no longer the major issue: disturbing allegations of fraud and corruption in the allocation of government contracts in Manitoba began to reach the ear of the minister.

At the end of August, Interior Minister David Mills arrived in Winnipeg to examine the operation of the various branches of his department. On 8 September he visited St. Peter's Reserve accompanied by Provencher. There the visitors were treated to a speech of almost five hours' duration by Chief Henry Prince. It was mainly a litany of grievances delivered with the chief's "rugged eloquence and quaint illustrations." Provencher, presumably to his embarrassment, was accused of being invisible when called upon and of treating the Indians "like dogs."⁷²

Mills remained in the West until 20 September. The barrage of complaints about the activities of the Winnipeg office which greeted him during this time convinced him that a closer examination was warranted. The man chosen to undertake this task was a fellow Ontarian, Ebenezer McColl, who was then resident in Winnipeg. He was given the title of inspector of Indian agencies and proceeded to make some discreet inquiries.⁷³ His findings were submitted to Mills on 15 October.

The inspector's report contained accusations that could not be overlooked. The Indians claimed that annuities frequently went unpaid, that they were given inferior livestock, equipment and provisions, and that Provencher was rarely available when they wished to see him. Many of these grievances were transmitted to McColl on behalf of the Indians by missionaries and prominent local politicians such as A.G.M. Bannatyne, W.F. Luxton and John Norquay. Norquay asserted that no amount of sophistry or white-washing would restore the Indians' confidence in Provencher and that unless he was replaced by an honourable man, trouble might ensue. Bannatyne was convinced that the management of Indian

70 See, for example, NA, RG 10, vol. 3613, f. 4057, Enjekapow, Indegous, Miskoopenis, and others to Laird, 28 September 1874.

71 Frémont, "Provencher," p. 38.

72 *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, 10 September 1877.

73 McColl was born on 13 August 1835 to Scottish immigrants at Brock's Creek near Eagle P.O., Upper Canada. He was a Primitive Baptist in religion. NA, RG 10, vol. 3582, f. 957, Department of Indian Affairs information form, 28 February 1882; minister of the Interior to McColl, 19 November 1877. PAM, MG 14 C29, Ebenezer McColl Papers, "Biographical Sketch."

affairs was "a perfect swindle." His father-in-law, Andrew McDermot, one of the original Selkirk settlers, held similar views: he believed that the transactions of the Indian office "were carried on in a most reprehensible and disgraceful manner," and he warned that unless their grievances were resolved, the Indians might join forces with "the warlike Sioux" to avenge their wrongs. Some local businessmen added to the chorus of discontent. Winnipeg's "merchant prince," J.H. Ashdown, felt that government contracts were unfairly awarded to his competitors in spite of his lower tenders and superior goods. There were even suggestions that accounts were falsified to Provencher's pecuniary advantage.⁷⁴

McDermot's reference to the Sioux evidently struck a nervous chord. Earlier in the year Sitting Bull and thousands of his followers had crossed to the safety of Canadian territory after their triumph at Little Big Horn. Mills noted that the hostility of these Indians to the American government arose from "the dishonesty of Indian agents" and Washington's failure to protect reservations from "an adventuresome and somewhat lawless white population." Ottawa, he proclaimed, would learn from the American experience and would root out abuses in Indian administration in Manitoba, should they be found.⁷⁵

On 12 November a commission composed of McColl and Winnipeg barrister W.H. Ross was appointed by the federal government to investigate the charges made against Provencher. Shortly afterwards the acting superintendent was suspended from office and Graham was placed in charge pending the outcome of the inquiry.⁷⁶ The commissioners began their deliberations on 18 December at the Indian office in Winnipeg.

Provencher had gathered about him a loyal coterie of friends, many of whom were prominent French-Canadians. They now rallied to his defence. Joseph Royal, Manitoba's attorney general, and Joseph Dubuc, speaker of the Legislative Assembly, served as his lawyers. But they were excluded from the hearings after three days when Provencher chose a private rather than a public inquiry. Royal could still help and he showed no hesitation in using, or perhaps abusing, his position in the cabinet to salvage the career of his embattled friend. He readily advised witnesses that the commission had no power to compel them to give evidence (this was not true, in fact) and he pressured the provincial justice system not to cooperate with the inquiry. As a result of these obstructions, the commission failed to hear the testimony of five witnesses, including Royal himself. Devotion to a friend was not the attorney general's only motivation in these machinations, for he

74 Ibid., vol. 3654, f. 8863, E. McColl to D. Mills, 15 October 1877.

75 *Report of the Department of the Interior for the year ended 30 June 1877*, report of the minister of the Interior, pp. xii and xviii.

76 NA, RG 10, vol. 3654, f. 8900, order in council, 12 November 1877 (No. 1004); headquarters to J.F. Graham, 20 November 1877; headquarters to Provencher, 20 November 1877.

was implicated personally in the shady business dealings of the hapless Indian superintendent.

Provencher was also adept at obstructionist tactics. Throughout the course of the inquiry he appealed regularly for adjournments, which were sometimes granted, but never with the frequency he demanded. Illness, or rather feigned illness, was another of his strategies; while thus indisposed, the commissioners allowed Provencher to be represented by anyone of his choosing. He declined this right, arguing that only he could conduct the cross-examination of his accusers. And cross-examine he did, but often in a frivolous and time-consuming manner which infuriated the commissioners.⁷⁷ He also wrote numerous letters to the federal Justice minister, Rodolphe Laflamme, objecting to certain aspects of the proceedings. He protested that he was not placed in possession of all the charges against him at the outset of the inquiry; that he was not allowed sufficient preparation time prior to the cross-examination of witnesses; that he was not granted ready access to documents in the Indian Office; and that evidence was recorded by the commissioners themselves, not by a neutral party.⁷⁸

These objections were transmitted to the Interior Department. There was no problem, the department insisted, since no one was on trial; the purpose of the inquiry was merely to gather information. Nevertheless, McColl and Ross were cautioned that Provencher's rights should be protected.⁷⁹

In all, sixty-four witnesses were called to the hearings: fifty-six were summoned by the commissioners; eight came at Provencher's behest. The inquiry concluded on 13 March 1878 and the commissioners proceeded to draw up a report for Ottawa.

The acting superintendent was found guilty of sixteen charges, the most serious of which are hereby recounted. Outright fraud was the principal problem, rather than mere incompetence or neglect, and Provencher's relationship with the hardware company of McMicken and Taylor was the major source of corruption. In examining the records, the commissioners discovered that the tenders for goods supplied to the department by that company were invariably higher and less specific regarding quality than those submitted by the rival firm of J.H. Ashdown, and yet were accepted in most cases. In fact, the manufacturer of the harrows supplied by McMicken and Taylor admitted that they were of poor quality. And a former clerk with the company confessed that it was standard practice to furnish the Indian department with "the most inferior articles." Even more curious was the fact that when many of these contracts were entered into,

77 Ibid., vol. 3677, f. 11,451, "Report of W.H. Ross and E. McColl to the Secretary of State," 21 March 1878.

78 Ibid., vol. 3654, f. 8900, Provencher to the minister of Justice, 19, 22, 29, 31 December 1877.

79 Ibid., headquarters to McColl and Ross, 7 January 1878.

the company was in serious financial difficulty — a fact known to Provencher — and it was doubtful whether it could uphold its part of the transactions. Indeed, it became insolvent in October 1877.⁸⁰

To compound matters, an examination of the books of McMicken and Taylor showed that the department had paid the company between \$2,800 and \$3,000 for goods which were never supplied. And there was a further discrepancy of \$1,600 which was unaccounted for. In fact, Provencher had tried to cover up this problem by inventing fictitious accounts.

Nevertheless, the investigation unearthed no direct evidence that the acting superintendent had accepted commissions from McMicken and Taylor or from anyone else. There were some perquisites, however. He had been allowed to run up a large personal account with the firm between February 1875 and the time of its bankruptcy; during this time he had only remitted \$13.50 while the balance stood at \$528.50. The former bookkeeper with McMicken and Taylor confessed that he had been instructed not to press Provencher for payment; it was understood that the debt would not be collected.

An arrangement of a similar nature existed with the firm of C.W. Radiger, an importer of wine, Guinness stout, and other necessities. In that instance, the department was charged for greater quantities of tea and tobacco than were actually supplied. The balance was often transferred into Provencher's private account with the firm, which he drew upon when in need of wine, liquor or "potted meats." This information was divulged by a former bookkeeper; Radiger himself was one of those who had avoided appearing before the commission with Royal's assistance.

Royal, it seems, had not been above attempting to profit from his friendship with Provencher by taking a hand in supplying cattle to the department. The investigators could not discern the exact role he played in these transactions, however, since the accounts were in a state of confusion. Nevertheless, the evidence of J.B. Lapointe was particularly damaging. Lapointe looked after a herd of cattle owned by Royal, and late in 1876 was instructed to send forty of them to the North-West Angle. Upon arrival there, the Indians would only accept four of the beasts and the remainder were driven back to Winnipeg in the depths of winter, a number being lost

80 J.H. Ashdown did rather well from the bankruptcy. He picked up the stock of McMicken and Taylor for 62 1/2¢ on the dollar. Ashdown was one of Provencher's principal critics and he evidently appreciated McColl's investigative zeal. On 5 January 1878 he treated his employees to an oyster supper at the Bodega and the inspector of Indian agencies was invited as a special guest. McColl's efforts were also appreciated by the Indians. On 19 January a Saulteaux group conferred the title of chief upon him — the English translation of the sobriquet he thus acquired was "The Bald-Headed Man." *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, "City and Provincial News," p. 1, 27 December 1877; 7 and 19 January 1878. For a biographical sketch of Ashdown, see Alan F.J. Artibise, *Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth, 1874-1914* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), 29.

along the way. The thirty-two cattle that survived the return journey perished in the next few months. Provencher's explanation for this debacle was that the Indians had not been prepared to accept the cattle — neither shelter nor fodder being ready. But the Indians claimed, and this was corroborated by agents McPherson and Pither, that the cattle were wild and unmanageable. Royal had bought the creatures from T.J. Demers, a large-scale dealer who had imported them from Montana. Those who knew the herd estimated that the forty head supplied by Royal were worth about \$1,045, whereas the department had been charged \$2,004 for them. From this transaction the Indians had acquired four unruly beasts, Royal a tidy profit, and the public purse a gaping hole.

Accounts for cattle and carts amounting to \$5,000 were made out to a mysterious J. Tremblay. Try as they might, the commissioners failed to discover the identity of this man and they concluded that if he did exist, he could not possibly be a cattle dealer.

These were the most glaring instances of fraud and corruption implicating Provencher that came to light as a result of the inquiry. He was also found guilty of extravagance in official expenditure, of being "indifferent and inattentive towards Indians seeking interviews with him," of supplying poor quality provisions, and of being generally neglectful of the duties attendant upon his position.⁸¹

There could be no second chances when the catalogue of damning testimony was weighed in the balance. On 2 May 1878 Mills informed the governor general that the charges against Provencher had been "substantially borne out by the evidence elicited in the investigation" and recommended dismissal of the acting Indian superintendent. An order in council of 9 May approved this course of action.⁸² Provencher's successor was Molyneux St. John, who had left the Indian department some years earlier.⁸³ McColl remained in Manitoba as inspector of agencies.

Provencher's fall was reported in the local newspapers and fraud was given as the reason. Royal's role in the affair was also duly noted and some of those who resented his influence in the provincial governments of R.A. Davis and John Norquay tried to use the scandal to destroy him. The most uncompromising attacks came from an old rival, Henry J. Clarke, who was hoping to make a political comeback by pandering to incipient anti-French feelings among English-speaking settlers recently arrived from Ontario.⁸⁴

81 NA, RG 10, vol. 3677, f. 11, 451, "Report of W.H. Ross and E. McColl to the Secretary of State," and "Summary of Evidence," 21 March 1878.

82 Ibid., vol. 3654, f. 8900, Mills to the governor general, 2 May 1878; order in council, 9 May 1878 (No. 361).

83 Ibid., vol. 3668, f. 10,491, order in council, 8 October 1878 (No. 891).

84 "Clarke, Henry Joseph," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. 11 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 192-94.

In the pages of his short-lived *Manitoba Gazette*, Clarke described Royal as "a man plunged in corruption to the lips, steeped in the dark stream of selfish greed that he has been swimming in for years," and demanded that the federal government make public the details of the "Indian frauds."⁸⁵

John A. Macdonald, leader of the opposition at the time of Provencher's dismissal, was advised not to press the government on the scandal since those embroiled in it were mainly Conservatives.⁸⁶ And when he returned to power some months later, Royal and Joseph Dubuc reportedly lobbied him successfully not to release the McColl and Ross report.⁸⁷

Even so, Royal's reputation was seriously damaged. His leadership of the "French party" in the legislature was undermined and his unpopularity with the English-speaking population made rapid progress.⁸⁸ These developments undoubtedly contributed to his ouster from the cabinet in May 1879.⁸⁹

What future now awaited Provencher? He was still a prominent member of the community. When the University of Manitoba was established in 1878, he had been appointed to its governing body as one of the representatives of St. Boniface College. This honorary position was not affected by his fall from grace. He now tried his hand at the practice of law in partnership with an Irishman, Michael Carey, and it seems that he did some writing for *Le Métis*. But politics also attracted him. The Yamaska defeat was a fading memory and in the provincial election of December 1879 he entered the lists for St. Boniface. The result was disastrous: Provencher secured a mere four votes; his opponent, experienced politician Alphonse LaRivière, received 122.⁹⁰

This humiliation prompted Provencher's departure from the West. Early in 1880 he made his way back to Montreal where the world of journalism again beckoned. He wrote extensively for *La Minerve* in the following years, and also served briefly as editor of *Le Monde* (1883) and of *La Presse* (1884-85). His penchant for self-indulgence and high living remained undiminished and he suffered the ultimate consequence: on 28 October 1887 the

85 *Manitoba Gazette*, editorials, 19 October, 9 November 1878.

86 NA, MG 26A, John A. Macdonald Papers, vol. 252A, pp. 114259-66, C.W. Allen to J. A. Macdonald, 8 March 1878.

87 *Manitoba Gazette*, 15 February 1879.

88 NA, Macdonald Papers, vol. 354, p. 163341, C.W. Allen to J.A. Macdonald, 11 January 1879. PAM, MG 14 26, Joseph Dubuc Papers, vol. 23, "Mémoires d'un Manitobain" (1912).

89 The complex events surrounding Royal's fall are analyzed perceptively by Gerald Friesen in his "Homeland to Hinterland: Political Transition in Manitoba, 1870 to 1879," *Historical Papers/Communications Historiques*, 1979, pp. 33-41. Friesen, however, makes no reference to the Indian fraud scandal and to its effect on Royal's reputation.

90 Frémont, "Provencher," 39; *Manitoba Weekly Free Press and Standard*, 20 December 1879, "Local Elections," p. 8.

ravages of cirrhosis of the liver brought his life to an end at the relatively early age of 44.⁹¹

The administration of Indian affairs in Manitoba under J.A.N. Provencher illustrates clearly that the federal government treated its obligations to the Native population rather lightly. To the Indians their treaties were binding agreements; Ottawa regarded them as a necessary nuisance. Once the ink of the signatories was dry on the page, the government was in no hurry to fulfill its part of the bargain. Surveys of reserves dragged on for several years while squatters exploited the lands claimed by Indians. Schools were gradually created, but upon the initiative of missionaries rather than the state. The wherewithal to engage in farming was slow in coming, and when it did, it was rarely sufficient in either quality or quantity. Scrawny oxen and inferior ploughs were no match for the unbroken prairie sod. To make matters worse, there was little or no instruction in this new way of life. It is small wonder that economic self-sufficiency through agriculture remained an elusive dream for Indians.

Provencher's administrative incompetence and corrupt practices bear much of the responsibility for this malaise. Yet the government which appointed him and its successor which kept him in office for so long cannot be absolved of blame, for Ottawa regarded the Indian department as little more than a source of patronage. Complaints about Provencher's performance filtered back to the capital almost as soon as he had taken up his position, but they were overlooked for many years. Indians were chronic complainers after all, it was reasoned, and since they lacked the franchise they could be safely ignored.

If inefficiency was a failing that might be condoned, the fraudulent misuse of public funds was not. As evidence of the latter came to light in 1877, the government was forced to examine matters more closely; the magnitude of the corruption that was revealed in the inquiry meant that Provencher had to go. His departure, however, did not usher in a new era of honesty and dedication in Indian administration in the West: as the service expanded rapidly in the following decade, it continued to provide jobs for men whose most conspicuous qualification was allegiance to the party in power.

The fall of Provencher can also be seen as a symptom of the declining fortunes of the French-Canadian community in Manitoba as Ontarian newcomers came to dominate the province and its politics; one of his principal accusers was W.F. Luxton, editor of the *Free Press* and a noted opponent of French rights. The Indian fraud scandal was a regrettable gift to those who sought to overthrow the tolerant bilingual principles upon which the province was founded.

91 Frémont, "Provencher," 39-41; Ledieu, "Provencher," 221-22.

In his essay in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Kenneth Landry observes that Provencher was remembered "as a journalist of superior talent and a conscientious and honest administrator." The evidence for the latter contention would be interesting to see.⁹²

92 Landry, "Provencher," 716.