

REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Elsbeth A. Heaman, *Civilization: From Enlightenment Philosophy to Canadian History* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press 2022)

CANADA IS A *very* civilized country. This has long been the mythology; the “peaceable kingdom” is a designer label worn proudly in the ideological dress parades of the country’s chauvinist best. Historians have often marched in this procession, proclaiming their faith and fidelity. But only a rare few have had the audacity to insist that had their kind been listened to in the corridors of power, civilization’s Canadian content would be more certain, the nation demonstratively superior.

E.A. Heaman’s *Civilization* is nothing if not audacious. It is a large book with a short, if bold, message. “Where ‘theory’ sees cages, history sees civilization,” declares Heaman on the last page of her account, invoking the anarchistic sensibilities of David Graeber and David Wengrow, spelled out in their *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021). Liberalism and conservatism converge in Heaman’s intellectual history, the legacy of “enlightened self-interest and constitutionalism in Canada,” owing much to David Hume, shaping royal proclamations and various official, colonially sanctioned, and solicited reports of the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, until, by the 1860s and Confederation, property, and the power it both conveyed and demanded triumphed over propriety, unleashing the snarling hounds of predation and plunder. This has less to do with profit,

capital, capitalism, and Gustavus Myers’ history of great Canadian wealth, all of which figure in this book lightly if at all, and far more to do with the conceptualization of constitutionalism.

Intellectual history as a specific genre has the capacity to elide fundamental social fractures by designating particular ideas of indisputable importance and then reading into historical developments their undeniable influence. Heaman’s grand idea is that David Hume’s understandings of enlightened civilization, the perils of jealousy, liberal-conservative coalescence, commerce, cosmopolitanism, progress, the need for moderation, and the balance of powers constituted a theory of history that influenced not only architects of Canadian constitutionalism such as Lord Durham and the country’s first Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, but also the pivotal document of British North America colonialism, the Royal Proclamation of 1763. As such, the Royal Proclamation, in Heaman’s often complex analysis, is posed, contradictorily, as “ground zero for settler colonialism” as well as an attempt, however elliptical, “to construct something genuinely diverse and reciprocal.” (11) My reading of Heaman’s *Civilization* is that it is this latter, positive reading of the Royal Proclamation that prevails, enabling a certain civilizing brush to paint much of pre-Confederation history, undeniably years of Empire’s subordination of Indigenous peoples, with the pale hues of progressive relations of understanding and enlightenment, when a more ruinous

pallet of tragic shades seems more historically accurate.

In Heaman's telling, listening to this history of civilization's fall in the 1860s and 1870s explains the dispossessions inherent in 19th-century Canadian development, just as it can, if parsed with sufficient sophistication, unleash "the liberal purchase on a conservative order." This is regarded as the trajectory of our modern history. Late 20th- and early 21st-century history is one that "year by year gains ground in the courts, the legislatures, and public opinion more generally, as Canadians find new ways to connect and converse, and to live well together." (473) We are becoming civilized again, apparently, as we once were, before John A. Macdonald, Confederation, and an unlikely antiquarian, Daniel Wilson, the first Professor of History and Literature at the University of Toronto, did their bit to bring a colony of rough-edged compassion tumbling toward the abyss of settler colonialism. "Thus, did civilization become history in Canada. Indigenous chiefs and elders, artists, and historians, continued to put forward their accounts of themselves and their communities, but scholarly and political institutions had successfully made themselves strategically ignorant of those accounts." The *Indian Act* and its 1876 definition of "the Indian" as outside of self-civilizing agency followed. (447–448)

It is possible, of course, to disagree. Historically, the Royal Proclamation, a short document into which too much should not be read, was unambiguous, at the very least, that Indigenous peoples were the subjects of a British king and, as such, owed whatever rights bestowed upon them as the clash of Empires unfolded to the benevolence of a distant monarchy. On the contemporary terrain of today, in which Heaman invests much hope and not a little faith, one need not see Trudeau the younger as the exemplary

expression of a civilizing politics to appreciate that Pierre Poilievre and Danielle Smith convey something of the incivility of politics in our time. If civilization depends on court decisions and legislative culture, some will say, it is destined to be acutely constrained, if not doomed. As for public opinion, it is surely, as any election demonstrates and most forums suggest, divided. Among professional historians, for instance, there simply is no consensus about some of the pressing interpretive issues of our times, despite a tendency to bureaucratically proclaim broad agreement when it is all too clear that, if the patina of lowest-common denominator agreement is scraped away, no such analytic commonality exists.

Civilization's message overreaches. Upbeat and unblemished in its faith in the liberal enlightenment's possibilities, it rewrites a history of disorder and disappointment in a language of historicized hope. It sees in "modestly democratizing Enlightenment constitutionalism" answers to large issues of dispossession, alienation, and social conflict (12). It is refreshing to come across faith in a future that actual history, in all of its messiness, too often suggests will unfold in dispiriting ways. However reinvigorating *Civilization* may well be, its Canadian trajectory, embedded in the difficult and reciprocal ruts created by capitalism's and colonialism's rough ride through the country's centuries of making, remains less than convincing that answers to a transformative remaking lie in grappling with the legacies of enlightenment thought. That thought and the civilizing project it envisioned remain something to consider, of course, but it may well be that they constitute part of "all the muck of ages" that Marx insisted it would be necessary to dispense with if society was to be refashioned anew. And it is difficult to imagine, in 2023, anything short of such a revolutionary project coming to

grips with the historical hurt that centuries of subjugation have institutionalized, leaving entire populations debilitated and deformed, as well as resolutely dissenting, in the process.

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Larry Nesper, "Our Relations... The Mixed Bloods": Indigenous Transformation and Dispossession in the Western Great Lakes (Albany: SUNY Press, 2021)

FROM THE SIXTEENTH to the nineteenth centuries, European nations encountered diverse North American Indigenous groups possessing overlapping – and often contested – ecological niches, subsistence strategies, spiritual practices, and political alliances. These initial contacts evolved quickly into trading partnerships and political alliances as rival colonial powers sought to establish continental "beachheads" prior to westward expansion. By the mid-19th century, European colonies in North America had evolved into independent nation-states, while Indigenous groups struggled unsuccessfully to maintain their autonomy in the face of shrinking hunting territories, epidemic disease, and settler violence.

In the northern reaches of the continent, the U.S. and Canadian boundaries along the 49th parallel and the Alaska/Yukon borders respectively were codified into law. As the national boundaries evolved, so did the destinies of those Indigenous groups whose traditional territories were bisected *arbitrarily* by these imposed national boundaries. One of the Indigenous polities affected was the Anishinaabe/Chippewa, also known as the Ojibwa. The bands located southwest of the Great Lakes became "American" by default, and it is Wisconsin Chippewa communities bordering the southern

shores of Lake Superior that Larry Nesper details in his book.

What follows is a complex, multidisciplinary analysis of how 19th-century federal Indigenous policy failed to protect the ancestral lands of the Great Lakes Chippewa. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the reader to the natural environment of the southern Great Lakes, and to the Anishinaabe themselves, a collectivity characterized by its ethnic and racial inclusivity during the years of the colonial fur trade. During this period, there was little or no ethnic separation between full-bloods and mixed-bloods. However, this was to change as the fur trade declined in importance, and westward expansion accelerated.

Chapter 3 focusses on the past negotiation of treaties with the Great Lakes Chippewa, and how emerging concepts of race shaped differential government responses to mixed-bloods and full bloods. Tribal leaders' insistence that their mixed-race relations be included in any treaty agreements prompted government negotiators to consider Darwinian concepts of human evolution in their negotiations. One of these ideas, particularly the notion that agriculturalists were evolutionally superior to hunters and gatherers, provided the rationale needed to negotiate separate, parallel provisions for mixed-bloods among the Chippewa. Previous investigations suggested a link between the creation of separate 80-acre allotments for mixed-blood families in the 1854 treaty and the eventual dispossession of these families due to pressure from commercial lumber and mining interests at a later date. Indeed, out of nearly four dozen treaties negotiated in the region, there were nearly twenty separate land cessions from the 1820s to the 1850s.

The remainder of the book is a step-by-step accounting of over 200 years of struggle by various bands of Great