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THE MORAVIAN MISSIONARIES, THEIR INDIANS, AND THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT ¹

LESLIE R. GRAY

ONE OF THE most remarkable groups of settlers to come to Upper Canada was composed of Delaware Indians who arrived in canoes through the Detroit River gateway in 1791. They were Christian Indians who had been persecuted unmercifully by their own kinsmen because they had accepted Christianity and rejected warpaint, and by white men who failed to recognize their virtues. Their only staunch friends were the Moravian missionaries who had brought the Gospel to them years before and who, as teachers, had stayed with them to help them live it.

Their arrival at the secluded town site in Canada which they called Schoenfeld or Fairfield, ended a journey which had begun some forty years earlier. What brought the Indians and the Moravian missionaries to this remote area is a long and complex story which begins in the village of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 1741. Here the Moravians, members of the *Unitas Fratrum* or United Brethren, from Herrnhut, Saxony, were settling down to make a secure home for themselves and to bring the Gospel to the North American Indians. The *Unitas Fratrum*, as the church which sent out the first world group of Protestant foreign missionaries, concentrated on missions to such an extent that in the early days of Bethlehem (1747) 56 of the 400 inhabitants were absent in mission fields. Very gradually, against obstacles set up by whites as well as by heathen Indians, the Moravians influenced the Delawares of Pennsylvania and a kindred tribe, the Mahicans of New England, to accept Christianity. To keep them under religious discipline, the humble missionaries formed them into villages where they allowed them to live as Indians, but with a Christian outlook.

The Moravians taught their converts to benefit themselves by agriculture and simple trades. They also taught them peace — that war was not for Christians. Since the time of John Hus, (1369-1415), whose followers they were, the United Brethren had, as a religious principle, refused to bear arms.

About this time (before 1750), other Indian tribes were beginning to be openly resentful of white inroads into their territories. The fraudulent "Walking Purchase" of 1737 had opened the redmen's eye to whites' greed for land and had stiffened their resistance. Gradually, however, they withdrew to the north and west away from white settlements. In the French and Indian Wars and later uprisings, when the tribes fought against the loss of their lands, the Christian Indians, in their peaceful mission villages, suffered for their misunder-

¹ This paper is based on extracts from the material gathered by the Grays in the course of the research for Elma E. Gray's book, *Wilderness Christians*, to be published by Cornell University Press and Macmillan Company of Canada Limited (January, 1956) and is presented with the kind permission of the publishers. Principal sources were the Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pa., Whitefield House, library and museum of the Moravian Historical Society, and the Public Archives of Canada.

stood neutrality and were forced to move first to Western Pennsylvania, then to Ohio.

By the start of the Revolutionary War (1776) the Indian converts in the Moravian towns on the Muskingum River, Ohio, numbered several hundred. Schoenbrunn, Gnadenhutten, Lichtenau and Salem were thriving Indian-built villages with churches, schools, some minor trades, well organized farms and large herds. The Indians were readily accepting Christianity and peaceful pursuits.

During the early part of the Revolution the pacific attitude of the Moravian Christian Indians set the pattern for the rest of the Ohio Indian tribes. Most of the tribes remained neutral for a time but with a certain feeling of hostility against the Americans. The Moravian influence was later recognized by George Washington and other authorities of the period as having a decided bearing on the outcome of the Revolution.

Three Pennsylvania loyalists, who escaped from Fort Pitt in 1778 to join the British at Detroit, had a tremendous influence on the progress of the war in Ohio. They were Alexander McKee, Matthew Elliott and Simon Girty, who became officers and interpreters in the British Indian Department. All had lived close to the Indians and were trusted by them. They became the voice of the British Government on the Ohio frontier. Their propaganda and the heathen Indian's natural inclination for war against the Americans who had pushed them from their lands, soon brought most of the tribes into active hostility on the British side.

The Moravian towns were, for a time, islands of neutrality in the excited sea of Indian uprisings. In attempting to keep their Christian Indians neutral the missionaries incurred the ill-will of the British Indians and the commandant at Detroit, Major Arent Schuyler de Peyster. The Moravians could not watch war parties starting out for attacks on American forts without feeling some urge to save their countrymen by timely warnings. A number of messages were sent, one of which saved the garrison at Fort Wheeling but revealed the part played by the missionaries. The British commandant at Detroit moved with decision to cut the Missions' contact with the Americans.

On his instructions, the Wyandots forcibly removed the missionaries and their charges from their prosperous Muskingum villages and drove them like cattle to the Upper Sandusky regions. Here a temporary settlement was built which became known as Captives' Town. The missionaries were then summoned to Detroit by de Peyster. During their trial on charges of sending information to the enemy, their principal accuser, Captain Pipe, the war leader of the heathen Delawares, surprisingly spoke on the Moravians' behalf and asked that they be permitted to continue teaching his people. De Peyster then released them to return to the Sandusky. It soon became clear, however, that even the Sandusky territory was not safe for the Moravians. De Peyster ordered the missionaries brought again to Detroit for their own protection, but left the converts to their own resources.

The missionaries were offered safe passage to Bethlehem, but David Zeisberger, their leader, who could not forsake his Indians and his dream of an Indian church for every tribe, requested permission to stay in British territory with the hope of eventually re-establishing the Delaware mission. Some American historians would have us believe that Zeisberger had no choice. But he did, and he chose to remain, for the time being, under British protection. De Peyster helpfully arranged with the Chippewas for a stretch of land on the Huron River, near present Mt. Clemens, Michigan. In course of time a considerable number of the old converts found their way to their new home.

In 1786 when conditions in Ohio became more settled, Zeisberger and his followers attempted to go back to their Muskingum towns but the difficulties were still too great. The inroads of the settlers and the hostility of the Indians over the location of a fixed boundary indicated continual unrest and danger. There seemed no safety for a Christian mission south of Lake Erie. Zeisberger applied to de Peyster and McKee for advice, who in turn sent messages to the Indian Department at Niagara for instructions. Eventually the missionaries were told that they could settle at the mouth of the Detroit River, on either side. Matthew Elliott and Alexander McKee, who were responsible for much of their earlier suffering, could not do enough for them in Canada. They invited them to occupy their houses and to use their land for crops. Here, just south of present Amherstburg, the Moravians built their first village in Canada which they called "Die Warte", the watch tower. In this village, in 1791, they built the first Protestant church in Upper Canada west of Brant's Chapel of the Mohawks.

Even here they were not free from the comings and goings of Indian war parties who interfered with their worship and continually tried to persuade the converts to join in war schemes. Zeisberger asked McKee for permission to live "at the extreme bounds" of the British lands, and promised to improve the land until they could return to their own deserted Muskingum villages south of the lake. He suggested that they pick out suitable lands on the LaTranche (Thames) River and he would arrange it with the Chippewas.

Early in 1792 word came from McKee that government permission had been granted, and on April 12th they started for the Thames in McKee's boat and a number of their own canoes. The new home was the site of Fairfield, near the present Bothwell. The rights to the Canadian land upon which they settled were involved in what constitutes one of the strangest land deals in our history — a deal which has not been successfully culminated even after 163 years.

Less than a year after they settled, Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe visited Fairfield on February 16, 1793, on his way to Detroit and was amazed to see what had been accomplished. Simcoe told them that everything to the north was Chippewa land, but they were free to expand southward as far as they wished. He asked that they correspond with England and not with Bethlehem and informed them that they would have to take an oath of allegiance to the King. Zeisberger replied that none of the missionaries had renounced their allegiance to the King nor sworn it to the States. Simcoe was shown

the Act of Parliament,² signed by King George II, June 6, 1749, "for encouraging the people known by the name of the *Unitas Fratrum* or United Brethren to settle in His Majesty's Colonies in America". It recognized the Moravian Church "as an Ancient Protestant Episcopal Church," allowed the members to make a solemn affirmation instead of an oath, and exempted them from military service.

The presentation of this "Act" to Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe improved his already friendly attitude and eliminated some of his demands although he was pleased when Zeisberger suggested that the deed to their land might be made in the name of the Trustees of the United Brethren in London, England. Simcoe attended their church services and was agreeably surprised by the Indians' congregational singing and by their devout attitude.

Fairfield's missionaries became popular among the white settlers on the Thames for their humane and generous attributes. All were well educated in the classics and in theology, and although German was the native language of most and was used in their reports to Bethlehem, they could speak and write English fairly well and some became proficient in Indian dialects. One of their number, Gottlob Sensemann, was asked to represent the settlers in the Assembly, but he would not consider this, as his work was primarily among the Indians. In the summer of 1793 Sensemann appeared before the Council at Niagara to ask for a grant of land for the Moravians. The resulting Order-in-Council of July 10, 1793, directed the Surveyor General to lay out "a tract of land on River La Tranche; on a width of $6\frac{3}{4}$ miles about their village; extending twelve miles back on the south side, and northward to the Purchase Line."³ This comprised the approximate area of the present Township of Orford. As Lake Erie is not mentioned it is assumed that their land did not extend all the way to the Lake.

Five years later, on June 11, 1798, Sensemann appealed again to the Executive Council asking to be confirmed in the land. It was ordered that a survey be made and that this tract "be reserved for ever to the Society, in Trust for the sole use of their Indian Converts."⁴ Peter Russell, President of the Council, suggested to Sensemann that the tract be divided into lots among the Indian families.⁵ The Moravians would not agree to this as their success lay in keeping the

² 22 George II, Chap. xxx. *Acta Fratrum Unitatis in Anglia*. See E. de Schweinitz, *The Life and Times of David Zeisberger*, Philadelphia, 1871, p. 154. This Act had been passed at the request of Count Zinzendorf, a Bishop of the Moravian Church, and other Moravian leaders, following the expulsion of the missionaries and their Mahican Indian converts from the colony of New York in 1745, under an Act of that colony which forbade preaching by "Vagrant Preachers, Moravians and Papists." Although the Brethren's Act of the British Parliament ended such discrimination and actually put the Moravian Church on as favourable a religious level in the Colonies as the Church of England, the Moravians did not attempt further mission work on a large scale in the colony of New York.

³ Ontario Archives, *Report*, 1905, p. 248 — details from Surveyor General's Report of Dec. 24, 1793.

⁴ E. A. Cruikshank, ed., *Correspondence of the Honourable Peter Russell*, Toronto, 1932-6, II, 176-7.

⁵ Fairfield Church Diary, June 20, 1798: original M.S. in the Archives of the Moravian Church, Bethlehem, Pa.

Indians together in towns, and farming the fields in common under close supervision and training. Sensemann told the Council that if they insisted on dividing the land he would appeal to England. The idea was thereupon dropped. Up to this time the Moravian Indians, as they were called, shared with other tribes of Upper Canada in the distribution of the King's gifts but Colonel Claus of the Indian Department now announced that in future the presents would go only to those Indians who were willing to fight for their country in time of war. This automatically eliminated the Fairfield Indians and put an added strain on the missionaries to supply all their wants.

In October 1798, rumours reached Peter Russell of the proposed return to the Muskingum land in Ohio of Zeisberger and Edwards with seven Indian families. This no doubt influenced the Government to withhold the patent. By 1799 Sensemann, annoyed and alarmed when he learned that Abraham Iredell had not received instructions from York for the survey, wrote again to D. W. Smith, Surveyor General. This letter was read in Council but no reply is indicated in the records. The frustrated Sensemann could not cope with all his problems. He suffered from the effects of a fall from Fairfield's bridge, which he helped to build, and died on January 4, 1800, with his petition still unanswered. The leaders of the mission who succeeded him had no better success with their appeals and the mission continued without a deed to the land.

The description of Fairfield, given by one of the missionaries in 1798, reveals the contrast between this Indian settlement and white settlements on the Thames. This was not only a Christian village, but also a congregation — an Indian Church. It was "a sort of independent republic, under British protection but not subject to its laws or to Canadian laws." In the diarist's words: "It is governed solely by the precepts of the Gospel, such ancient Indian customs as are not repugnant thereto and a few regulations that have from time to time been adopted by themselves to suit their circumstance as a Christian Society."⁶ A copy of Fairfield's regulations is in the Archives at Bethlehem. Similar regulations for their Indian mission towns in Ohio are referred to today as Ohio's first civil code.

In the years that followed, the village of Fairfield had unquestionably a greater measure of progress and success than the scattered white hamlets around them. They had a compact town, reasonably self-sufficient. The majority of the Indians were trained in various trades and crafts or worked as farmers with grain, cattle and maple sugar for commodity export. It is certain these Indians had better schooling and more thorough religious training than their white neighbours. The missionaries preached in the white settlements when they could but the Indians were their chief concern and religious education was an important part of the Indians' daily programme.

But the wars they had come to Canada to escape followed them in 1812. They had placed their town on the only highway and also on the inland waterway from Niagara and York to Detroit. British forces on their way to the western frontier stopped at Fairfield. The

⁶ Fairfield Church Diary, July 16, 1798.

Indian tribes, under arms for the British, took with them to the war areas some of Fairfield's Indians, in spite of the missionaries' pleas for them to remain quiet at home. In 1813, after the defeat of the British fleet on Lake Erie, it was inevitable that General Henry Procter's retreat should bring both British and American armies along Fairfield's main street.

Procter's early plan called for the fortification of Fairfield after recompensing the Moravians for their buildings, cattle and crops. The rapid advance of the American army gave him no opportunity to complete his plans and the so-called Battle of Moraviantown took place in a beech woods, a mile and a half away, where Procter's outnumbered forces made a weak and futile stand. Tecumseh's death ended the opposition of the British Indians, and the American conquerors overran Fairfield. After looting the town and taking away 17 raft-loads of plunder, the Americans burned the entire village "putting the first torch to the Moravian Church."⁷

Three missionaries returned to Bethlehem, but Christian Frederick Dencke and his wife led the frightened flock, 187 of them, to Burlington where, for the duration of the war, they existed on government bounty and the few crops they could raise on partially cleared land. Dencke not only watched over the Indian converts but served spiritually the whites in the district.

In 1815, the war over, Dencke helped his Indians establish a new village on the south bank of the Thames, almost opposite their burned homes. This settlement they called New Fairfield and was one mile north of present Moraviantown. A frame church, built in 1848 on the site of the log church of 1815, stands today beside other mission buildings of the same period.

Petitions were sent to the United States and Canadian Governments asking for compensation for Fairfield's loss. The detailed claims indicate the comparatively high degree of culture attained by these Indians under Moravian supervision. The United States refused recompense. The Canadian Government recognized the claims and those of other Indian tribes but it was many years before a fraction of the claims was paid. No compensation was given to the Moravians for their personal property loss or that of the mission buildings.

Following the War of 1812, the Denckes continued to serve the mission but the Indian Department of the Government assumed more and more of a supervisory role of the work at New Fairfield. The Government did not realize the difference between the Moravian mission village and the settlements of half savage Indians, untrained, uneducated and with little or no religious instruction. Government representatives, no doubt misunderstanding the mission leaders quiet, aloof policy, dealt directly with the Indians rather than through the missionaries.

Meanwhile, white settlers were eyeing the 51,000 acres of rich farm and timber land reserved for the Indians, of which less than 1000 acres were being used. Colonel Talbot's settlement road along Lake

⁷ "The McAfee Papers", *Kentucky State Historical Society Register*, XXVI, No. 77, p. 129.

Erie by 1816 had cut into the Moravian grant. The concessions north of the Talbot road became attractive to settlers, and the Government made the first of several attempts to buy lands from the Indians without consulting the missionaries who had persuaded the Indians not to sell. In 1821 new surveys almost cut off the land north of the Thames but timely interference by Abraham Luckenbach, the missionary, resulted in the laying out of a tract six miles deep on each side of the Thames with the village in the centre. Pleased at first that the new transfer would keep his flock closer together and the whites at a greater distance, Luckenbach was dismayed at the results. In exchange for nearly 40 square miles of good farmland in Orford Township, eagerly sought by settlers, the Indians had been given a similar area of swampy land in the southern part of Zone Township.

In 1834 some of the converts proposed to move to the western states along with American Delawares, but the plan temporarily petered out. Lieutenant-Governor Sir Francis Bond Head, in 1836, personally visited Fairfield and tried to buy a quantity of land from the Indians, completely ignoring the missionaries. While the majority refused to sell, those who wished to emigrate westward agreed to his offer. By a vote in a council meeting of 28 to 26, the Indians surrendered the 26,000 acres north of the Thames for an annuity of \$600, (less than \$2.00 a year per person).

The missionaries protested as the land had been allotted to them in trust for their Indians, but their pleas fell on deaf ears. They took their case to the British Government, stating that they would agree to the cession of the land, if an area, $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles square, north of the river, including the original Fairfield would be reserved and if their remaining 25,000 acres south of the river would be patented to them. They asked also to be consulted in future negotiations. To all this the Colonial Secretary in London, England, agreed, stating that he questioned the Upper Canadian Government's right to withhold even the land they had taken. In spite of this no patent was issued for their remaining land, and only through a stubborn insistence could the missionaries even get their northern boundary extended to the road — old Fairfield's main street. Half of their former town, including the cemetery, was taken from them.

The annuity of \$600 plus the payment of £293 for improvements and the additional £239 paid on the 1812 war loss claims made the converts temporarily independent. The majority decided to go west and 230 left in 1837 for Missouri. One of the missionaries, Jesse Vogler, accompanied them and with other leaders sent from Bethlehem attempted to hold the converts together and add to their numbers in the west. This project was not successful and Vogler and some Indians returned to Fairfield in 1843.

The immense stands of timber on Moravian lands could not help attracting enterprising whites, who unlawfully negotiated with the Indians to cut the timber without the sanction of the missionaries or the council. The mission attempted to protect the rights of all by making a deal on behalf of the entire tribe but only drew the wrath of the timber merchants in Wardsville and Chatham and the accusation that they were trying to make personal gains. At this point, Chief

Jacobs, who had refused to move from the site of Old Fairfield, and who was resentful of Moravian authority, rejected the missionaries entirely and invited the Methodist circuit riders to come to New Fairfield. Eager to gain a foothold among these educated Indians, the Methodists complied and a great split developed in the ranks of the Christian Indians which has never to this day healed. The Methodists, the first churchmen who had ever tried to seduce the Indians away from the Moravians, were successful. Jacobs, however, eventually quarreled with them and refused them entry to the church they had built on his property. Instead, he called in the Anglicans and so three denominations fought for the souls of three hundred Moravian Indians.

The Government stepped into the timber crisis and refused permission to cut any trees. For a time, starvation threatened the village as the Indians sat idly by. They no longer worked great fields but only grew minimum crops, and indolently tried to employ white labourers to cut the timber and cultivate the land for them.

The coming of the railway increased the Indians' cupidity and the white man's greed. The value of land was booming. Towns, such as Bothwell, were springing up along the possible route of the Great Western Railway. The Indians were holding an immense unimproved tract along the route. At Toronto a plan was devised in 1857 to safeguard the Indians and to secure land for white settlements. Houses were built for Indians who had to be moved onto the new smaller reserve. Each Indian male over 12 years received 40 acres for himself. Each was to have a "license of occupation" for his land. The Moravian church was given a similar license but still no deed for their mission lands, including a small productive farm. The remainder of the tract was sold at public auction in London and the proceeds of over \$150,000 were used to provide a trust fund for the tribe. This, today, takes care of tribal expenses and pays each Indian about \$10 a year.

The reserve, reduced from its original 75 square miles to about 4 square miles, was entirely south of the river. The mission, now on the northern edge of the reservation, was no longer the centre of activity. A new Government school, in competition with the Moravians, was built with Indian funds a mile and a half south of the mission. Here, at later dates, the Methodists and Anglicans built their churches and a new town, Moraviantown, developed.

Old Fairfield and its graveyard passed out of Moravian hands. Chief Jacobs, the dissenter, was given a license of occupation for this area but at his death it was feared that it would revert to the Crown. Two days after Chief Jacob's death in 1870, the missionary wrote trying to make sure that the cemetery and the road to it would be considered the property of the Moravian Indians and would not be included in any sale to settlers. For reasons unknown, this petition remained unanswered in the Indian Department and in 1889, George Yates received from the Crown a patent for Lot B "excepting the Indian Burying Ground of 51/100 of an acre." No road giving access to the cemetery was provided.

Although the Moravians at times regained the leadership, they eventually decided that their missionaries could do more useful work

elsewhere, and in 1902 the church and mission buildings were sold to the Methodists and the Moravians withdrew completely.

Even the presence of the cemetery and "Old Fairfield Village" was forgotten for years until the late John R. MacNicol, M.P., interested himself in the story of Fairfield and re-located the site. Wilfrid Jury excavated the area in 1942-6 and established the location of the main street and many of its principal buildings destroyed in 1813. But with all his influence at Ottawa, MacNicol was not able to establish a right of way into what must be Kent County's earliest permanent cemetery, established in 1792.

When the Methodists took over at Fairfield, even the ownership of the church, mission and adjoining farm lands was questioned. The Indians associated with the Anglican Church resented the sale of the mission to the Methodists. They claimed that all Indians had equal rights in the mission property. Lawsuits developed but it was finally decided that although no patent had been issued for the land, the Moravians had a right to transfer to the Methodists their "license of occupation". And so the right of the United Church, successors to the Methodists, stands today, with still no clear deed to the land after 163 years of continuous occupation of the property by the mission.