

# Two Acres and a Cow: 'Peasant' Farming for the Indians of the Northwest, 1889-97

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INDIAN COMMISSIONER HAYTER REED announced in 1889 that a new 'approved system of farming' was to be adopted on western Indian reserves.<sup>1</sup> Indian farmers were to emulate 'peasants of various countries' who kept their operations small and their implements rudimentary. In Reed's opinion a single acre of wheat, a portion of a second acre of roots and vegetables, and a cow or two could provide sufficiently for an Indian farmer and his family. He argued that it was better for Indians to cultivate a small acreage properly than to attempt to extend the area under cultivation. Moreover, this restricted acreage eliminated any need for labour-saving machinery. Peasants of other countries, Reed contended, farmed successfully with no better implements than the hoe, the rake, cradle, sickle, and flail, and he believed that Indians

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- 1 Canada, *Sessional Papers*, 1889, no 10, 162. Hayter Reed was born in 1849 in L'Original, Prescott County, Ontario. His early training and career interests were military. In 1871 he served with the Provincial Battalion of Rifles when they were dispatched to Fort Garry as reinforcements during the Fenian scare. Reed was called to the bar of Manitoba in 1872. He retired from military service with the rank of major in 1881. In 1880 he worked out of Winnipeg as 'chief land guide' with the Department of the Interior. He was appointed to the position of Indian agent in Battleford in 1881. He had little direct experience with or knowledge of Indians before his first posting. Yet he quickly rose through the ranks of assistant commissioner in 1884, commissioner in 1888, and in 1893 he assumed the position of deputy superintendent general of Indian Affairs. In 1897 he was dismissed by Clifford Sifton, minister of the interior. Reed found employment in 1905 as manager-in-chief of the Canadian Pacific Railway's hotel department.

had to be taught to handle these simple tools. They were to broadcast seed by hand, harvest with scythes, bind by hand with straw, and thresh with flails. In some districts Indians were discouraged from growing wheat altogether in favour of root crops, and this further reduced the need for any machinery. As part of the program, Indians were required to manufacture at home, from materials readily available, many of the items they needed such as harrows, hay forks, hay racks, carts, and ox yokes.

Indian farmers were compelled to comply with the peasant farming policy until 1897, when Reed's career with the department abruptly ended. This policy, along with the permit system and the subdivision survey of portions of reserves into forty-acre plots, had a stultifying effect on Indian farming, nipping reserve agricultural development in the bud.

Agriculture was not well-established on western Indian reserves by the turn of the century. It has generally been argued that Indians, because they were hunters and warriors, were unable to adapt to farming, and that they could not be transformed into sedentary farmers.<sup>2</sup> The story is far more complex, however. There was an initial positive response to agriculture on the part of many reserve residents which has been overlooked in the literature to date. There were also many difficulties. Some of these problems were those experienced by all early settlers – drought, frost, hail, and prairie fire, an absence of markets, and uncertainties about what to sow, when to sow, and how to sow. There were other problems that were not unique to the Indians but were likely magnified in their case. For example, reserve land often proved to be unsuitable for agriculture. Indian farmers also had limited numbers of oxen, implements, and seed: the treaty provisions for these items were immediately found to be inadequate. Indians were greatly hampered in their work because they lacked apparel, particularly footwear. They were undernourished, resulting in poor physical stamina and vulnerability to infectious diseases.

Indian farmers were also subject to a host of government policies and regulations which hampered agricultural development. If an Indian farmer sought better railway, market, or soil advantages he was not able to pull up stakes and try his luck elsewhere, since an Indian could not take out a homestead under the 1876 Indian Act. Nor could Indians raise outside investment capital; reserve land could not be mortgaged and Indians had difficulty obtaining credit. Freedom to sell their produce and stock and to purchase goods was strictly regulated

2 G.F.G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions* (1936; Toronto 1975), 218

through a permit system, just as movements off the reserves were rigidly monitored through a pass system.

By the late 1880s Indian farmers of the Qu'Appelle district of Treaty Four had few tangible rewards to show for their years of effort.<sup>3</sup> The decade of the 1880s had been described as a 'nightmare' to the early Saskatchewan pioneers, with drought and frost causing homesteaders to desert the district in large numbers.<sup>4</sup> For Indian farmers, however, the 1880s were not totally disastrous. Significant strides had been taken towards alleviating many of the problems which had handicapped reserve farming in the past. For the most part, local officials of the Department of Indian Affairs, the agents and farm instructors, had played a constructive role in facilitating favourable conditions. Steps had been taken to address such problems as the scarcity of milling and threshing facilities. A cattle-on-loan policy helped to assure a larger future supply of work oxen. Farmers on the reserves experimented with such techniques as summer-fallowing and they tested varieties of seed sent from the Central Experimental Farm in Ottawa. Indians participated in the agricultural fairs held annually throughout the Territories, even taking prizes against all competitors for their wheat and cattle. During the 1880s Indian farmers had also begun to acquire some of the equipment necessary to expedite their operations. Mowers and rakes were the most common purchases, and some bands acquired self-binders. Local officials felt that mowers and rakes were essential as stock was increasing, and that self-binders both lessened the danger of the crop being caught by frost during a protracted harvest and reduced the waste experienced in binding with short straw, thus encouraging the farmers to cultivate a larger area.<sup>5</sup> Almost all of this machinery was purchased from the Indians' own earning, with purchases being made by a band or a number of farmers together and the money coming from the proceeds of crops or from pooled annuities.

Indian farmers of the 1880s, then, were learning the techniques and acquiring the machinery that their farm instructors and agents agreed were essential to dry-land farming. They were not in all cases moving towards conformity with the individualistic model of the independent

3 This study focuses on the Touchwood Hills, File Hills, Muscowpetung and Crooked Lakes agencies. These are Plains Cree and Plains Saulteaux bands.

4 G. Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto 1984), 222

5 National Archives of Canada (NA), records relating to Indian Affairs, RG 10, vol. 3686, file 13,168, A. McDonald to Edgar Dewdney; 25 June 1884, vol. 3687, file 13,642, John Nicol to Dewdney, 30 May 1884; vol. 3812, file 55,895, W.E. Jones to Hayter Reed; 18 Sept. 1890, vol. 3795, file 46,759, H.L. Reynolds to Indian commissioner, 6 June 1888

homesteader; bands pooled their resources for the purchase of implements and on many reserves the fields were tilled in common. Qu'Appelle white farmers remember the year 1890 as 'the turn of the tide; after that all went well.'<sup>6</sup> All did not go well for Indian farmers, however. Unprecedented administrative control and restriction of their farming activities in the years to 1897 helped ensure that they remained small-scale producers.

The peasant farming policy emerged during an era when the stated priorities of the Department of Indian Affairs were to dismantle what was called the 'tribal' or 'communist' system and to promote 'individualism.' After 1885 in particular these goals were undertaken with great vigour and commitment, along with an increased emphasis on the supervision, control, and restriction of the activities and movements of the Indians. Hayter Reed, a major architect of Indian policy in the Northwest in the decade following the 1885 resistance, fully endorsed these goals. Appointed commissioner in 1888 and deputy superintendent general in 1893, Reed was in a position to articulate and compel obedience to his views. He boasted that under his administration 'the policy of destroying the tribal or communist system is assailed in every possible way, and every effort made to implant a spirit of individual responsibility instead.'<sup>7</sup> Although Reed's ultimate goal was to see the reserves broken up, he claimed that in the meantime his department was teaching the Indians step by step to provide for themselves through their own industry, and inculcating in them a spirit of 'self-reliance and independence.'

One way to undermine the tribal system was to subdivide reserves into separate farms. Large fields worked in common fostered the tribal system; according to Reed they did not encourage pride and industry. The individual farmer did not feel it worth his while to improve land significantly when other members of the band also claimed it as their own.<sup>8</sup> With a certificate of ownership, it was believed, the enterprising Indian would be induced to make permanent improvements such as superior cultivation, improved housing, and better fencing, all of which would have the effect of tying the owner to the locality. Reed was also convinced that private property created law-abiding citizens. Property would render the Indians averse to disturbing the existing order of things, as 'among them as among white communities, the lawless and revolutionary element is to be found among those who

6 *Qu'Appelle: Footprints to Progress: A History of Qu'Appelle and District* (Qu'Appelle Historical Society 1980), 101

7 *Sessional Papers*, 1889, no 12, 165

8 *Ibid.*, 166

have nothing to lose but may perhaps gain by upsetting law and order.<sup>9</sup>

Severalty was not a new idea in Canadian Indian policy, nor was Reed the first official to promote the scheme for the Indians of western Canada, but under his administration the program began in earnest. In his annual report for 1888 Reed announced that reserves in the Northwest were to be subdivided into forty-acre plots or quarter quarter sections.<sup>10</sup> Survey work, which began the following spring, was done on reserves where farming had met with some success – that is, where the capacity of the land for agriculture had been proven.<sup>11</sup> Reserves with poorer land – such as the File Hills and Touchwood Hills – were not subdivided. The forty-acre plots were located well back of the main-line Canadian Pacific Railway and the new towns along its route, well back of the fine agricultural reserve land that new settlers and townspeople were beginning to covet – the land that was eventually surrendered.

It is clear that what was in the best interests of the agricultural future of these bands was not in the minds of those who devised this policy. When the subdivision surveys were proposed, government and Indian Affairs officials had objectives in mind beyond the establishment of agriculture on an individual model. John A. Macdonald was enthusiastic about severalty, not as a method of promoting individual initiative and private ownership, but as means of defining 'surplus' land on reserves that might be sold.<sup>12</sup> If each Indian were allotted the land he would likely require for cultivation, the amount of surplus land available for surrender and sale could be ascertained.

Public opinion appeared to endorse heartily the department's policy of allotment in severalty, as a means of striking at the heart of the 'tribal' system. Respected spokesmen such as Father Lacombe agreed that farming Indians could be made more industrious if they were permitted to take up land in severalty.<sup>13</sup> The *Ottawa Journal* hailed the subdivision of the western reserves as a 'step forward,' for 'as soon as the Indians are willing to throw up tribal connections and treaty

9 McCord Museum, McGill University, Hayter Reed Papers, address on the aims of the government in its dealings with the Indians, nd, 29

10 *Sessional Papers*, 1888, no 16, 28

11 On Pasquah's reserve, for example, 164 forty-acre plots were surveyed. Sixteen of these were divided by deep ravines, leaving 148 lots. The population of the reserve was 124, so there was little room for future expansion. This 6560 acres was only a fraction of the 38,496 acres of the reserve. See NA, National Map Collection, 0011553, Pasquah no 179, 1889.

12 Kenneth J. Tyler, 'A Tax-eating Proposition: The History of the Passpasschase Indian Reserve' (MA thesis, University of Alberta, 1979), 114

13 NA, RG 10, deputy superintendent letterbooks, Vankoughnet to Dewdney, Nov. 1889

money, they retain these lands as personal property, and become citizens.<sup>14</sup> The *Moosomin Courier* considered severalty to be a very fine stroke of 'national policy'; 'Chief Bull Frog and his band' had already been introduced to the modern system of farming, but they now needed individual ownership as 'self-interest is a wonderful stimulant.'<sup>15</sup> It was proclaimed in an 1890 *Courier* that 'superior houses, better fences, larger fields, and more extensively cultivated areas' already attested to the success of the policy, although it is unlikely that reserve residents were at this date conforming to the allotment survey. These words were taken almost directly from the Indian Affairs annual report of 1889, in which the happy results likely to attend distribution in severalty had been outlined.<sup>16</sup>

A letter published in a November 1890 issue of the *Ottawa Citizen* from 'Nichie' of Battleford gave a glowing appraisal of the severalty policy in terminology that bore striking similarities to department publications.<sup>17</sup> The author observed that Indians with allotments made worthy efforts to improve and better their condition. He felt this system annulled tribal influence, 'the bane of Indian progress,' and instead engendered a healthy spirit of rivalry between individuals and bands. Under the system of all things held in common, the industrious worker had to share whatever was harvested with the idle, discontented, and worthless. This was discouraging to progress. The author perceived that the desire to occupy separate holdings was spreading, particularly among the young men, and he predicted that the time was not far distant when the Indians would no longer be consumers of government 'grub' but producers, relieving the government larder.

The peasant farming policy, introduced at the same time as severalty, was also presented as a means of destroying the system of community ownership on reserves and enhancing individualism and self-support. The central rationale advanced in support of the policy was that it was 'the manner best calculated to render [the Indians] self-supporting when left to their own resources.'<sup>18</sup> Reed repeated many times in his correspondence and public pronouncements that he believed the time was not far distant when the Indians would have to depend entirely upon their own resources. 'Our policy,' he stated, 'is to make each family cultivate such quantity of land as they can manage with such implements as they can alone hope to possess for long enough after being thrown upon their own resources.'<sup>19</sup>

14 *Ottawa Journal*, 20 June 1889

15 *Moosomin Courier*, 13 March 1890

16 *Sessional Papers*, 1889, no 12, lx

17 *Ottawa Citizen*, Nov. 1890

18 *Sessional Papers*, 1889, no 10, 162

19 McCord Museum, Reed Papers, 'Address,' 28

The Indians were to aim, not at breaking up large quantities of land, but at cultivating a restricted amount which could be worked solely with the family's own resources. Labour-saving implements, Reed argued, were 'likely to be beyond acquisition by the majority of Indians for some time after they may have been thrown upon their own resources.'<sup>20</sup> Reed was not pleased that Indians tended to club together to purchase implements because this reinforced the band unit. He wanted to see the Indians become self-sufficient as individuals not as bands. On their own, however, these individuals were not likely to be able to afford machinery. Although Reed conceded that there were individual Indians who were independent of government assistance and could not be restrained from purchasing machinery out of their own earnings, he felt such cases were rare. If Indians received any assistance at all in the way of seed grain, rations, or other goods, then they were not self-sufficient and should not be making payments on machinery. Well-to-do farmers could instead pay for the labour of other Indians.<sup>21</sup> Indian women, Reed hoped, could work in the fields, particularly at harvest time. Agents and inspectors were to cancel the sales of machinery to Indians, even though these were purchased by the Indians and not by the department.

According to Reed, labour-saving machinery was not required by Indians. They should cultivate root crops rather than concentrate upon extensive grain growing.<sup>22</sup> In Reed's view, root and not cereal crops taught Indian farmers to be diligent and attentive: 'I've always advocated growing as many root crops as possible but Indians have to be humoured a good deal in such matters; and as soon as they begin to make some little progress they become fired with an ambition to grow larger quantities of wheat and other cereals [rather than] roots which require working and weeding at the very time they like to be off hunting while the former only require to have cattle kept away by means of a good fence.'<sup>23</sup>

The need to go into debt to buy machinery such as self-binders seemed a further reason to halt the use of these implements. Farmers who had to obtain credit were not regarded as self-sufficient. Reed believed the system of purchase on credit of farm machinery had widely and ruinously affected white settlers, and he shared with other department officials the view that Indians were prone to run into debt and were unable or disinclined to discharge their liabilities.<sup>24</sup> It was

<sup>20</sup> *Sessional Papers*, 1892, no 14, 48

<sup>21</sup> NA, RG 10, vol. 3964, file 148,285, Reed to Amédée Forget, 24 Aug. 1896

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3793, file 46,062, Reed to Dewdney, 11 April 1888

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3746, file 29,690-3, Reed to superintendent general, 30 Sept. 1886

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3908, file 107,243, Reed to agent Markle, March 1895, and *Sessional Papers*, 1891, no 14, xvii

wiser, he felt, to wait and see whether the climatic conditions of the country warranted the purchase of labour-saving machinery. Machinery, he argued, would not bring prosperity; it had instead been the means of ruining large numbers of settlers.<sup>25</sup>

Another argument Reed forwarded against Indian use of labour-saving machinery was that rudimentary implements afforded *useful* employment for all. The possession of machinery, he believed, allowed the Indians to do nothing but 'sit by and smoke their pipes while work was being done for them without exertion on their part,' a situation he believed they preferred.<sup>26</sup> In his view the use of such implements was justified only when manual labour was scarce, and this was not the case on Indian reserves.

The same reasons were advanced for the necessity of home manufactures. Gainful employment during spare time prevented the 'mischief which emanates from idleness,' and trained the Indians for the time when they would be totally thrown upon their own resources.<sup>27</sup> Indian men and women were first encouraged and then required to make an endless list of items 'in common use upon a farm.'<sup>28</sup> Women's manufactures included mitts, socks, willow baskets, mats, and straw hats. Men were expected to make axe and fork handles, ox collars and harnesses, wooden harrows, bob-sleighs, and Red River carts. Compliance with this policy was readily enforced when requests for the purchase of these items were simply stroked off the estimates.

Reed drew on aspects of an evolutionary argument to support his peasant farming policy. In the late nineteenth century, those who took an evolutionary view of the North American Indian and other 'primitive' people believed that there were immutable laws of social evolution.<sup>29</sup> It was thought that man developed progressively through prescribed stages from savagery through barbarism to civilization. These stages could not be skipped, nor could a race or culture be expected to progress at an accelerated rate. The Indians were perceived to be many stages removed from nineteenth-century civilization, and while they could take the next step forward, they could not miss the steps in between.

Reed employed these notions in defending his stand on machinery. He argued that Indians should not make an 'unnatural' leap from

25 NA, RG 10, vol. 3964, file 148,285, Reed to Forget, 24 Aug. 1896

26 *Sessional Papers*, 1889, no 12, 162

27 *Ibid.*, 1891, no 14, 196

28 *Ibid.*

29 Brian Dippie, *The Vanishing Indian: White Attitudes to U.S. Indian Policy* (Middletown 1982), 164-71. See also Robert E. Bieder, *Science Encounters the Indian, 1820-1880: The Early Years of American Ethnology* (Norman 1986).



barbarism to a nineteenth-century environment, including all its appliances.<sup>30</sup> The Indian was 'prone to desire to imitate the white man's nineteenth century civilization too hastily and too early.'<sup>31</sup> Reed noted this at length in the first of his annual reports outlining the peasant policy: 'The fact is often overlooked, that these Indians who, a few years ago, were roaming savages, have been suddenly brought into contact with a civilization which has been the growth of centuries. An ambition has thus been created to emulate in a day what white men have become fitted for through the slow progress of generations.'<sup>32</sup>

The ban on labour-saving machinery was something of an about-face for Hayter Reed and the department. Until the peasant program was introduced, the purchase of mowers, horse rakes, threshing machines, and other implements was heralded in the annual reports as evidence of a new spirit of individualism, prosperity, and overall progress. Such purchases were also used as evidence that the Indians were not 'squandering' their earnings as many believed they were prone to do.

At the outset of his career as commissioner, Reed was convinced that a means of fostering an independent, proprietary spirit among the Indians was to allow the 'industrious' to purchase some property in the way of wagons and implements out of the proceeds of the produce they were allowed to market. If individual Indians were to be allowed to acquire some personal property, their rations should not be suddenly and completely withdrawn once they met with some success, for they would be left wondering whether their exertions were worth the effort.<sup>33</sup> If the industrious were compelled to devote all of their earnings to the purchase of food, while those who produced half the crop received the balance from the government, there would be no incentive to work. The industrious had to be allowed to invest a fair share of their earnings. Reed's policy with regard to the individual enterprising Indian was to continue to assist him for a time so that he could purchase wagons, harnesses and implements. In that way 'he develops into the stage of being a property holder, and soon begins to look down upon those whose laziness compels them to seek assistance from the government. Meanwhile what he had purchased secures him the means of assured independence while he has been acquiring the spirit to make it safe to discontinue helping him and his position awakens a spirit of emulation in his less industrious brother.'<sup>34</sup> Reed

30 NA, RG 10, vol. 3964, file 148,285, Reed to Forget, 24 Aug. 1896

31 McCord Museum, Reed Papers, 'Address,' 28

32 *Sessional Papers*, 1889, no 12, 162

33 *Ibid.*, 1888, no 16, 125

34 McCord Museum, Reed Papers, 'Address,' 27

believed that as the farming Indians gained a sense of pride in their prosperity, they would be less inclined to share their produce with 'impecunious neighbors,' as in the days when 'communist' ideas prevailed.<sup>35</sup> This would, he hoped, compel the more reluctant Indians to put themselves into the hands of the government for similar training.

What accounts for the sudden introduction and enforcement of a ban on machinery? Immigrant settlers resented Indian competition for the limited markets of the Northwest. The 1880s saw increasingly strained relations between Indian and white farmers, a situation that was aggravated by the lean times. Local department officials generally came to the defence of the Indians' interests, while more distant officials appeared willing to please the more politically powerful settlers, at the Indians' expense. The recent arrivals believed that everything should be done to encourage their enterprise. They considered themselves the 'actual' settlers, the true discoverers and developers of the country's resources. They believed that the government had bought the land from the Indians, and it was now the government's 'right and duty to look after the interests of the settlers, both present and future, for whom the land was bought, and out of whose earnings it is expected ultimately to be paid for.'<sup>36</sup>

By the late 1880s, farmers in some areas of the Northwest were complaining loudly about 'unfair' competition from Indians in obtaining a share of the markets for farm produce, and a share of contracts for the supply of hay, wood, and other products. They believed that government assistance gave the Indians an unfair advantage, allowing them to undersell the white farmer. Complaints from the Battleford district were particularly strident as the markets there were strictly limited and local, and competition was intense. In 1888 the residents of that town petitioned their member of parliament, stating that 'the Indians are raising so much grain and farm produce that they are taking away the market from the white settlers.'<sup>37</sup>

A visit to Battleford that year appears to have had an important impact on Hayter Reed. There he was 'assailed' by complaints about the effects of Indian competition.<sup>38</sup> As a Department of the Interior 'chief land guide' in Manitoba in 1880-1, Reed had urged settlers to consider points as far west as Battleford.<sup>39</sup> He had given his assurance

35 *Sessional Papers*, 1889, no 12, 161

36 *Edmonton Bulletin*, 17 Jan. 1881

37 House of Commons, *Debates*, 19 May 1880, 1610. See also Walter Hildebrandt, 'From Dominion to Hegemony: A Cultural History of Fort Battleford,' unpublished manuscript, 1988, Department of Environment, Parks, Prairie Region.

38 *Sessional Papers*, 1888, no 16, 127

39 NA, RG 15, records of the Department of the Interior, vol. 245, file 23,563, part 1

that despite the absence of a railway, farmers could be guaranteed a market for their produce as the government's demands alone for the Indians, the Mounted Police, surveyors, and other crews would absorb all of a farmer's surplus.<sup>40</sup> If the Indians were able to provide for themselves as well as sell a surplus, the already limited markets were further restricted.

Following his 1888 visit to Battleford, Reed decided that until a railway extended the settlers' opportunities, his department must do what it could to prevent jealous competition.<sup>41</sup> Competition for markets, he claimed, was disastrous to the Indians in any case, as they were so anxious to find purchasers that they would part with their products for a 'trifling consideration.'<sup>42</sup> Reed arranged with the Battleford citizens to divide up the limited markets in the district. Much of the trade in cordwood was left to the Métis, as this was their mainstay over the winter. The Indians were allowed to supply wood to the agency and, for one more year, to the industrial school. The sale of grain in the district was left exclusively to the white settlers.

The peasant farming policy, introduced a year after Reed's visit to Battleford, helped eliminate the Indians from effective competition. The permit system was another means of regulating the Indians' participation in the market economy. Under the Indian Act the department could regulate the sale, barter, exchange, or gift of any grain, roots, or other produce grown on reserves.<sup>43</sup> The official rationale for the permit system was that Indians had to be taught to husband their resources. John A. Macdonald stated that 'if the Indians had the power of unrestricted sale, they would dispose of their products to the first trader or whiskey dealer who came along, and the consequence would be that the Indians would be pensioners on the Government during the next winter.'<sup>44</sup> The permit system, however, further precluded the Indians from participation in the market economy as they could not buy, sell, or transact business.

While the peasant policy excluded Indians from effective competition with white farmers, Hayter Reed may have hoped that it might, nonetheless, provide a secure means of subsistence for the Indians. In nineteenth-century liberal economic thought the peasant proprietor gained a new respectability.<sup>45</sup> Among others, John Stuart Mill opposed the concentration of landed property in the hands of a few great estate owners and favoured the creation of a class of peasant proprietors.

40 Ibid., Hayter Reed, 'Canadian and United States Immigration,' May 1880

41 NA, RG 10, vol. 3806, file 52,332, Reed to Vankoughnet, 27 Oct. 1888

42 Ibid.

43 *The Historical Development of the Indian Act* (Ottawa 1978), 93

44 Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 24 March 1884, 1063

45 Clive J. Dewey, 'The Rehabilitation of the Peasant Proprietor in Nineteenth-Century Economic Thought,' *History of Political Economy* 6 (1) (1974): 17-47

This it was believed would raise agricultural productivity, lower prices, and reduce urban unemployment. Peasant proprietorship would have social as well as economic consequences as the owner would take a permanent interest in the soil. He would be 'thrifty, sober, honest and independent.'<sup>46</sup> With a stake in the country, former day labourers would be less inclined to 'wanton aggressions,' or 'mischief,' and instead would be interested in preserving tranquility and order. These were exactly the qualities Reed attributed to his peasant proprietors.

In the 1880s these ideas had wide public support in England and America. 'Three acres and a cow' was promoted by individuals and charitable organizations as a means of reforming and controlling the behaviour of the working classes, veterans, immigrants, and criminals.<sup>47</sup> In 1890 the Salvation Army's founder, William Booth, published *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, in which he advocated the settlement of the poor on three- to five-acre allotments with a cottage and a cow.<sup>48</sup> Reed's plan bears some resemblances to Joseph Chamberlain's 1885 election cry, 'Three Acres and a Cow.'<sup>49</sup> Chamberlain's loosely sketched agrarian reform policy involved the compulsory purchase of land by local authorities in order to repopulate the country with independent English yeoman. A visit to Canada in 1887 may have generated interest in Chamberlain's ideas on land reform.<sup>50</sup>

The peasant farming policy and subdivision of reserves into forty-acre plots were probably also inspired by the general allotment policy in the United States, codified in the Dawes Act of 1887. The rhetoric was precisely the same – that individual lots and ownership would create stable, sedentary farmers. In the United States those who supported allotment in severalty argued that the policy of concentration and isolation upon reservations had failed to resolve the Indian 'problem.'<sup>51</sup> Private property was the key to transforming the Indians into 'civilized' agriculturalists. Pride of ownership generated individual initiative and taught the Indians self-support. Private property destroyed the tribal relationship, breaking the yoke of authoritarian chiefs and allowing 'progressive' Indians to accumulate wealth and property. Supporters of the Dawes Act felt that an end to the isolation of the reservation would enhance Indian farming as Indians would

46 *Ibid.*, 32–47

47 See Clark C. Spence, *The Salvation Army Farm Colonies* (Tucson 1985), 2–7, and Frederic Impey, *Three Acres and a Cow* (London 1885).

48 William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (London 1890)

49 Richard Jay, *Joseph Chamberlain: A Political Study* (Oxford 1981), 99

50 Willoughby Maycock, *With Mr. Chamberlain in the United States and Canada, 1877–88* (London 1914)

51 Dippie, *Vanishing Indian*, 160

reap the benefit of close association with enlightened white farmers. Tardy progress had resulted from this isolation as the Indians' environment was closed to all progressive influences. Assimilation, through allotment in severalty, seemed to offer a permanent solution. Isolation was condemned as an obstacle to national unity, and as a means of keeping alive racial distinctions.<sup>52</sup> Reservations seemed to have no place in a country which championed the concept of equal rights for all.

The Dawes Act was a major triumph for humanitarian reformers who were convinced that individual ownership was the key to the 'civilization' of the Indians, but it also appealed to those with overt self-interest in mind. It was obvious from the outset that allotment would open much reserve land for settlement. By granting land to individual Indians, 'surplus' lands could be defined and made accessible. After a stipulated acreage went to each Indian family, the remaining land would be thrown open to white settlement, and sizeable portions of reservations would be sold. Many of those who supported the measure were interested in securing Indian land at a time when farm land was becoming increasingly scarce.<sup>53</sup>

Reed was convinced that the independent, subsistence farm could exist on the Canadian prairie, and he was not alone in cherishing the ideal of the self-sufficient farm where the family produced its own food, manufactured at home necessary non-agricultural goods such as clothing and furniture, and did not buy or sell. The notion that this was a superior way of life was widespread and persistent, and was reflected in the suspicion of labour-saving machinery and concern about the use of debt and credit. The ideal of the self-sufficient farmer continued to appeal to the general public whereas the concept of agriculture as a market and profit-focused business met with considerable criticism.<sup>54</sup>

Commercial agriculture required new ideas, attitudes, and knowledge. What and how much should be produced on the farm were determined by external market conditions rather than by the family's needs and desires. Under market conditions the farmer made a business decision and had to take into consideration the nature of the soil, the characteristics of commodities, access to markets, and world prices. Commercial farming involved a 'rational' approach to technology. Potential profit rather than immediate need led the commercial

52 Loring B. Priest, *Uncle Sam's Stepchildren: The Reformation of United States Indian Policy, 1865-1887* (New York 1969), 126

53 *Ibid.*, 232

54 Rodney C. Loehr, 'Self-sufficiency on the Farm,' *Agricultural History* 26, (2) (1952): 37, and Clarence Danhof, *Change in Agriculture: The Northern United States, 1820-1870* (Cambridge 1969), 15

farmer to purchase expensive implements on credit; payment would in part come from the increased productivity contributed by the new implement. The efficient, profitable management of the farm enterprise thus required new attitudes towards technology, credit, and debt, for immigrant settlers and Indians alike. Hayter Reed felt that Indians were incapable of understanding these concepts, and could not operate farms as business enterprises. His belief in the inability of Indians to manage their own financial affairs, and to handle debt, credit, or the new technology thus precluded commercial farming.

In the United States the ideal of the self-sufficient farm was never more than 'a nice dream of a golden age'; nor was Canadian pioneer agriculture ever self-sufficient.<sup>55</sup> Pioneer farmers, economist Vernon Fowke has argued, were 'from the beginning tied in with the price system and the urban economy on a national and international basis.'<sup>56</sup> The farmer had to purchase his transportation and to outfit himself with the necessary provisions and implements. Although the farmer may not have produced a marketable staple for some years, he had products such as hay and wood to sell locally. Exchanges might be made through barter rather than cash, but these nonetheless constituted commercial transactions. Homesteaders were in need of cash and could rarely acquire enough to finance their operations. They could not borrow against their land until title was acquired, which involved a minimum three-year's wait. The farmer required credit to secure his provisions, implements, and other supplies. The standard practice was to have credit advanced at the beginning of the crop season for seed, tools, and consumable goods, with payment made at harvest time.

Subsistence farming was not characteristic of the pioneer farms of the prairie west. From the beginning these farms were connected to the local, national, and international economy. Nor did the difficulties of the 1880s imply a need for self-sufficient farms. Large-scale, single-crop farming and the introduction of the techniques and technology of dry farming would be more likely to encourage agricultural prosperity on the plains. Like other western farmers, Indian farmers tended more towards commercial than subsistence farming, focusing on wheat culture, acquiring machinery to accommodate large acreages, and adopting techniques such as summer-fallowing. In their need to acquire cash, make purchases, and sell products, Indian farmers were just as linked to the larger economy as white settlers. Yet the peasant farming policy required Indian farmers to function in isolation from the rest of western Canadian society.

This attitude was unrealistic. Subsistence farming remained at best a

<sup>55</sup> Loehr, 'Self-sufficiency,' 41

<sup>56</sup> Vernon Fowke, *The National Policy and the Wheat Economy* (Toronto 1957), 12

questionable model for the arid Canadian plains, and it may even have been impossible.<sup>57</sup> Western farmers were independent neither of the markets, nor of each other. Settlement of the prairies required mutual assistance and co-operation among neighbours and relatives. Working bees, pooled purchasing, and beef rings were characteristic of the pioneer years. Indians were denounced, however, when they undertook such co-operative action. Indian farmers were expected to conform to the nostalgic ideal of the independent, self-sufficient yeoman.

It soon became clear that peasant farming was a dubious model for reserve agriculture. Farm instructors, Indian agents, inspectors, and Indian farmers all protested the system. Despite this advice, Reed rigidly enforced the policy. As commissioner, he kept a vigilant eye on every kettle and lamp ordered, and he maintained close surveillance as deputy superintendent general. Agents were not allowed to spend a 'single copper' without the authority of the commissioner.<sup>58</sup> Reed's replacement as commissioner, Amédée Forget, had very limited powers of expenditure; even the most minute expense had to be sanctioned by Reed. Forget could under no circumstances authorize the purchase, hire, or use of machinery. When Forget requested greater powers of expenditure in 1894 in order to be able to respond to requests requiring immediate action during critical seasons, Reed replied: 'I would say that I am only too desirous that you take upon your shoulders this part of the work, and thus relieve me of it. The fear I have had – to be candid – is that my policy might not be strictly carried out, and I foresee that if it is slackened in the slightest, it will lead us not only to a largely increased expenditure but upset what I have in view, and this is, causing our Indians to work upwards by learning how to cut and sow their grain in the most crude manner possible, and not beginning at the large-end of the norm, with self-binders and reapers.'<sup>59</sup>

During haying and harvest time the full weight of the policy was felt. Agents and instructors were to see that the Indian farmers accomplished these tasks without the aid of any machinery. Even when bands had reapers and self-binders purchased before the policy was adopted, the farmers were to use hand implements. Larger farmers were expected to purchase the labour of others rather than revert to the use

57 Irene M. Spry, 'The Tragedy of the Loss of the Commons in Western Canada,' in Ian A.C. Getty and Antoine S. Lussier, eds., *As Long as the Sun Shines and Water Flows: A Reader in Canadian Native Studies* (Vancouver 1983), 221

58 NA, RG 10, deputy superintendent general letterbooks, vol. 1115, p. 220, Reed to Forget, 12 June 1894

59 Ibid.

of machinery, or were to restrict their acreages to what they could handle with hand implements. 'The general principle,' Reed explained in 1893, 'is not to allow them machinery to save them work which they should with hands available on Reserves, do by help of such implements as are alone likely for long enough, to be within their reach.'<sup>60</sup>

Department officials in the field protested the peasant farming policy from its inception. They were dismayed by a policy which appeared to rob the Indians of any potential source of revenue. Their main objection was that the use of hand implements involved much loss in yield at harvest time. Harvesting coincided with haying, and both had to be secured with haste. As the Edmonton agent wrote in 1896: 'Personally, I do not see how any band of Indians in this district can ever raise sufficient grain or cattle to become self-supporting as long as they have to work with sickles and scythes only, as the seasons are so very short, haying and harvesting coming together. Perhaps in the south where the seasons are longer the system would work successfully, but up here no whiteman attempts to do so.'<sup>61</sup>

Agents throughout the Northwest – even those much further south than Edmonton – agreed that the seasons were too short for the use of hand implements. Once ready to cut, it was vital that grain remain standing for as brief a time as possible. The Carlton agent advised that because the climate brooked no delay with regard to securing grain, conditions in the Northwest could not be equated with the early days of farming in the eastern provinces when hand implements were used.<sup>62</sup> If not harvested as quickly as possible, grain could be lost to frost, hail, dry hot winds, or an excess of moisture. Agent Grant, of the Assiniboine reserve, protested that 'the seasons in this country are too short to harvest any quantity of grain, without much waste, with only old-fashioned, and hand-implements to do the work with.'<sup>63</sup> In his view it was not possible to harvest the 240 acres of grain on his reserve with hand implements without a great loss in yield. The grain had to be cut as soon as it was ready to avoid loss, since the harvest weather was generally hot, windy, and very dry. Grant estimated that the amount of grain lost in his agency would be of sufficient quantity in two years to pay for a binder. Loss occurred, not only through the grain being too ripe, but in the gathering and binding by hand as well. Grant informed Reed that the prairie straw was dry and brittle, and would not tie the grain without breaking, which caused considerable loss. While the farmers on his reserve used the long slough grass to bind grain,

60 NA, Hayter Reed Papers, vol. 14, Reed to T.M. Daly, 10 March 1893

61 NA, RG 10, vol. 3964, file 148,285, Chas. De Cases to Reed, 19 Nov. 1896

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., W.S. Grant to Reed, 1 Oct. 1896



collecting it took up much time, leaving the grain in danger of over-ripening.

Agents also complained that the cradles broke constantly during harvest, which caused delays for repairs. The policy of employing labour to help take off a crop seldom proved feasible. Workers had their own fields to harvest. One agent reported that farmers who hired others spent more for labour than their crop was worth.<sup>64</sup> He tried to get neighbours to exchange work in each others' fields, but those available to help were usually those without crops who required pay for their labour.

Inspector Alex McGibbon was also critical of the peasant farming policy. He informed Reed in 1891 that it was contrary to common sense to ban universally the use of machinery.<sup>65</sup> Exceptions had to be made and flexibility shown. McGibbon gave the example of the Onion Lake band which had 500 acres under crop, much of which would be lost if the department insisted it be cut with cradles. Then there was a farmer with about fifteen acres 'of as pretty wheat as could be seen anywhere.'<sup>66</sup> The man was in frail health, however, and could not secure the help of others who had their own fields to look after. McGibbon observed the man cradling and his wife binding but was certain that 'the waste on that field alone would be nearly half the crop.'<sup>67</sup>

Agents and instructors reported difficulty enforcing the peasant policy. It was almost impossible to get the Indians to cut with cradles or sickles, especially those who had implements already.<sup>68</sup> Agents provided Reed with numerous examples of farmers who attempted the work and gave up, refusing to return, and of others who would not even attempt it.<sup>69</sup> It was reported that the Indians became discouraged, and lost all interest in their crops.<sup>70</sup> These were not 'lazy' Indians. Agent Campbell of the Moose Mountain agency, for example, cited the case of an Indian farmer whom he considered to be the most 'progressive' in the agency.<sup>71</sup> He began to cradle his grain but quit, declaring that he would let his grain stand and never plough another acre. By no means averse to hard work, the man chose to work on the straw pile of a threshing machine, a job 'not usually considered pleasant.' Agent Grant described the reaction of 'Black Mane,' who had fifteen acres of very good wheat and, 'when told that he would have to

64 Ibid., W.E. Jones to Reed, 1 Nov. 1896

65 NA, Reed Papers, vol. 13, no 869, McGibbon to Reed, 16 March 1891

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., vol. 14, no 989, R.S. McKenzie to Reed, 16 Dec. 1890

69 NA, RG 10, vol. 3964, file 148,285

70 Ibid., Grant to Reed, 1 Oct. 1896

71 Ibid., J.J. Campbell to Reed, 8 Oct. 1896

cut and bind it by hand, gave up his oxen, and left both his wheat and *reserve*. I gave his wheat to his brother. I have been told that he is now at Wolf Point, in the States. This will show how hard it is to compel an Indian to harvest his grain by hand.<sup>72</sup> It was also the case that some Indian farmers were not strong enough, either because of age or sickness, to harvest their grain by hand. In August 1890 the Pelly agent reported that 'the Indians here, from scrofulitic [sic] effects have not enough strength to mow [hay] with a scythe and put up any quantity.'<sup>73</sup> If they had only two or three head they could manage to put up enough hay but any more was beyond their ability with scythes and rakes.

The Indians often became discouraged when they saw white farmers using machinery. Agent Grant reported that the Indians on his reserve worked for white settlers, used binders when they stooked for them, and not surprisingly were discouraged when asked to cut and bind their own crops by hand.<sup>74</sup> Indian farmers were also keenly aware of what methods were used on reserves throughout the Northwest. McGibbon reported in 1891 that 'the Indians know all that is going on at the various agencies.'<sup>75</sup> The Carlton agency Indians knew precisely how many binders the Crooked Lakes Indians had and how many seeders were in another agency. Chief Mistawasis demanded to know in 1891 why the Battleford Indians, and John Smith's band, had reapers when his farmers were not allowed them.<sup>76</sup> McGibbon informed the chief that these were purchased before the policy was adopted, that such sales were now being cancelled, and that he and his men should be out in the fields cutting and stacking grain rather than wasting valuable time talking.

Restrictions on the use of machinery were not the only aspects of the peasant policy that agents disliked. The home manufactures program, which called for the use of Indian-made implements, also proved unrealistic. Indian-made wooden forks, for example, could not be used for loading hay, grain, or manure.<sup>77</sup> Iron forks were required and even these frequently broke or wore out and had to be replaced. In some districts, moreover, appropriate materials such as hides and lumber were not available to manufacture ox-plough harness, wagon tongues, or neck yokes. Poorly made or faulty neck yokes could break going down a hill, and cattle could be injured if not killed. Other items struck from agents' estimates included lanterns and tea kettles. Agents

72 Ibid., Grant to Reed, 1 Oct. 1896

73 Ibid., vol. 3812, file 55,895, W.E. Jones to Reed

74 Ibid., vol. 3964, file 148,285, Grant to Reed, 1 Oct. 1896

75 NA, Reed Papers, vol. 13, no 869, McGibbon to Reed, 16 March 1891

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid., vol. 14, no 989, McKenzie to Reed, 16 Dec. 1890

protested that Indians could not look after their cattle at night without lanterns and that not having proper kettles resulted in the waste of much time.<sup>78</sup>

Hayter Reed was not the slightest bit sympathetic or nor moved by the objections and complaints of his agents, inspectors, and commissioner. His response was to dismiss their claims. Reed was aware of a 'lack of sympathy' among agents and employees, but he was convinced that they were inclined to be too lenient with the Indians.<sup>79</sup> 'Naturally,' he wrote to McGibbon, 'Indians and their overseers prefer to take the method easiest for themselves, and it is only after a hard and long continued fight, that I am beginning to get the policy carried into effect.'<sup>80</sup> Officials in the field, Reed believed, desired to make things as easy as possible for the Indians and consequently for themselves.<sup>81</sup> Indians 'naturally' preferred to have machinery do their work for them.

Reed refused to give in to the 'whims of Farmers and Indians,' and advised that growing less grain or losing some of the crop was preferable to the use of machinery.<sup>82</sup> He did not believe, however, that any grain need be lost by harvesting with hand implements, but that the loss in yield was due entirely to the 'half-heartedness' of instructors and agents.<sup>83</sup> With greater firmness they could manage to save their crop. If grain was being lost, the solution was for the farmers to confine their acreage to what they could handle. Reed informed one official that 'any loss suffered in the course of enforcing the policy will prove in the long run true economy.'<sup>84</sup> Supplementary hay, Reed naïvely assumed, could be acquired after harvesting, and he saw no conflict between the two operations.

Farm instructors were told not to meddle in the issue of machinery but simply to obey orders. Agents explained to all employees working in the fields with the Indians 'that it was their duty to set aside completely any opinions they might hold regarding the feasibility, etc., of carrying out this policy, and to act and speak always as if they had full confidence in the wisdom of getting the Indians to cut their grain by hand, and in the possibility of succeeding in doing so.'<sup>85</sup> Inspectors were instructed neither to convene nor be present at meetings with

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid., vol. 14, no 1206, Reed to McGibbon, 7 Nov. 1891

80 Ibid.

81 NA, RG 10, vol. 3964, file 14,285, Reed to Forget, 24 Aug. 1896

82 Ibid., deputy superintendent general letterbooks, vol. 1115, 220, Reed to Forget, 12 June 1894

83 NA, Reed Papers, vol. 14, Reed to Daly, 10 March 1893

84 Ibid.

85 NA, RG 10, vol. 3964, file 14,285, Campbell to Reed, 8 Oct. 1896

Indian farmers, as this would give an 'exaggerated importance' to their requests for machinery.<sup>86</sup> Instead, they were to defend vigorously the department's policy and severely discourage labour-saving machinery. Political opposition to the peasant policy was also dismissed by Reed: 'It may distress one in opposition to the Government to see what he does not understand the reasons of, but I fancy if we were to pamper up Indians in idleness while we supply machinery to do their work, the opposition would soon give tongue to the distress occasioned by such a course.'<sup>87</sup>

Department employees risked dismissal if they refused to comply with the peasant farming policy. Agent Finlayson of the Touchwood Hills agency was fired because he would not 'make his Indians provide hay and harvest their crop without the use of labour saving implements as the department is opposed to for Indian use.'<sup>88</sup> Despite this powerful lever to enforce policy, Reed's peasant program showed signs of crumbling by the season of 1896. That year many disgruntled and angry agents defied orders and used machinery. At his Regina office, Forget was harangued by officials requesting permission to use machinery.<sup>89</sup> That season was subject to severe hailstorms. Seventy thousand acres of crop were destroyed in western Manitoba in one storm, and many settlers were hailed out near Regina.<sup>90</sup> It was of vital importance that the crop be cut as soon as it was ready. Forget granted permission to several agents to borrow or hire binders from settlers. He informed Reed that authority was granted only on the understanding that the agent 'make a bona fide effort to secure the whole crop, or as much of it as possible, by hand appliances and it is understood that only upon all such efforts failing to secure the crop with sufficient rapidity either on account of the state of the weather or the inadequacy of the workers, is the authority to employ machinery to be made use of.'<sup>91</sup>

During the harvest of 1896 some agents openly defied the peasant policy or complied only half-heartedly. Agent McDonald of Crooked Lakes stated that he and his staff made no efforts that season to force the Indians to harvest their grain without the aid of labour-saving machinery.<sup>92</sup> He noted that earlier attempts to do so had failed, and that the Indians became discouraged and would not work. The agent claimed to have done his honest best to carry out the department's

86 NA, Reed Papers, vol. 14, no 1206, Reed to McGibbon, 7 Nov. 1891

87 Ibid., vol. 14, Reed to Daly, 10 March 1893

88 NA, RG 10, deputy superintendent general letterbooks, vol. 115, 382, memorandum relative to Mr Agent Finlayson

89 Ibid., vol. 3964, file 148,285, Forget to Reed, 20 Aug. 1896

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid., McDonald to Reed, 16 Feb. 1897

policy, but the Indians were 'so far advanced' with such large acres of grain that he could make no headway. He had tried to get those with smaller crops to harvest by hand, but even they had someone with a binder cut their crop for them. Had he expressed 'violent opposition to the Indians, I should only have achieved the result of making the smaller farmers so sullen, that they would have put in no crop at all, had they the prospect to cut it with a sickle, and the large farmers would have met me with contempt, and gone their own way, with a wide breach between us.'<sup>93</sup> McDonald noted that the harvest of 1896, amounting to over 9000 bushels of wheat and 3500 bushels of oats, 'would have been impossible without implements.'<sup>94</sup>

J.P. Wright, the Touchwood Hills agent, also admitted that the harvest in his agency was accomplished with the aid of labour-saving machinery.<sup>95</sup> Gordon and Poor Man's bands each owned a self-binder, and it was useless, the agent claimed, to ask them to cut their grain with sickles and cradles because they would not do it. Wright reminded Reed, as all the agents did, that the Indians were busy with their haying at harvest time and the grain had to be cut with as little delay as possible. Other agents in the Northwest in 1896 claimed to have accomplished one-half or less of the harvest by hand methods before they were obliged to save the balance of the crop with machinery.<sup>96</sup> Reed remained adamant, demanding that the peasant policy be rigorously pursued.<sup>97</sup> Although he admitted that machinery might be necessary where Indians had large crops, he nonetheless expected that a strong effort be made to carry out the policy for all others.

The agents' reports reveal some glimpses of how Indian farmers reacted to the peasant farming policy. Many became angry and discouraged, while some refused to work and gave up farming altogether. The outlets for Indian protest during the 1890s were few. Grievances related to instructors and agents generally went no further. Inspectors were not allowed to hold audiences with the Indians. The published reports of agents and inspectors were to divulge only that 'which it was desired the public should believe.'<sup>98</sup> Visiting officials, journalists, or other observers were taken to a few select agencies. When the governor general planned a visit to the west in 1895, Reed arranged to have him visit only the most 'advanced' reserves, such as

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid., J.P. Wright to Reed, 16 Feb. 1897

96 Ibid., Grant to Reed, 1 Oct. 1896; Jones to Reed, 1 Nov. 1896; de Cases to Reed, 19 Nov. 1896

97 Ibid., Reed to Forget, 25 Feb. 1897

98 Ibid., deputy superintendent general letterbooks, vol. 1115, Reed to J. Wilson, 3 Aug. 1894

the Crooked Lakes.<sup>99</sup> The August visit was to be hastily diverted elsewhere, however, if the crops failed on the reserves.

An 1893 petition from the head men of the Pasquah and Muscowpetung bands, addressed to the House of Commons, succeeded in gaining the attention of officials in Ottawa.<sup>100</sup> The Indians resented the restrictions on their freedom, and the interference of the agent in all of their affairs. Among other things they protested the permit system: 'Whenever we have a chance to sell anything and make some money the Agent or Instructor steps in between us and the party who wants to buy, and says we have no power to sell: if this is to continue how will we be able to make a living and support ourselves? We are not even allowed to sell cattle that we raise ourselves.'<sup>101</sup> The petitioners wished to purchase a binder, noting that taking off the grain with a cradle was too slow, but 'the Commissioner objected to us buying a Binder as he said it would make the young men lazy.'<sup>102</sup> The Indians claimed that 'when we ask the Agent for farm implements he sends us to the Commissioner, and he in turn sends us back to the Agent. This has completely discouraged us, as our old implements are worn out,' and 'many of the fields we used to farm are now all grown over with grass.'<sup>103</sup>

This petition received no action; the allegations were dismissed and the document filed away and forgotten. Hayter Reed denied the legitimacy of and refuted the charges and grievances. In a memo dealing with the petition, Reed vigorously defended his department. The permit system, he argued, was a necessity. Without it, 'Indians would be defrauded, and would part with hay while their cattle was left to starve – grain and roots which they require for sustenance, etc. etc., squander the proceeds, and then come on the Government for support. Our object is to make them acquire the limit of stock to afford them an annual surplus to dispose of, meanwhile when they have a steer or other animal which can not be profitably kept longer they are allowed to sell. If left to their own discretion there would not be a head of stock left.'<sup>104</sup>

The 1893 petition from the Pasquah and Muscowpetung Indians was dismissed, but in the 1890s this kind of protest was not unusual. Discontent over the peasant policy, permit system, and other restrictions was widespread. In 1893 the Dakota of the Oak River reserve in

99 *Ibid.*, vol. 1117, p. 319, Reed to Forget, 20 July 1895

100 NA, Reed Papers, vol. 13, no 960, McGirr to Reed, 8 March 1893

101 *Ibid.*

102 *Ibid.*

103 *Ibid.*

104 *Ibid.*

southwestern Manitoba protested the same issues, but even though they succeeded in receiving considerable attention through their petitions, letters, a visit to Ottawa, and their defiance of regulations, their actions did not occasion a reconsideration or revamping of policy.<sup>105</sup> By this time a formula response to all Indian grievances was well entrenched. Indians were dismissed as chronic complainers and lazy idlers willing to go to any lengths to avoid work. At the same time, nefarious 'outside agitators' – usually unnamed – were blamed for any discontent.

Official pronouncements of the Department of Indian Affairs emphasized that Indian interests were paramount and that such measures as the peasant policy and the permit system were undertaken out of concern for their welfare and development. In this period and well into the twentieth century, however, Indian interests were consistently sacrificed to those of the new settlers, and there was little concern to develop independent Indian production. Organized interests were able to influence the course of Indian policy by petitioning and lobbying their members of parliament. Agents on the spot and visiting officials were pressured from neighbouring whites. The Indian's interests were easily sacrificed as they had no vote and no economic power. This pattern continued into the twentieth century when effective pressure was mounted to have the Indians surrender reserve land that was suitable for agriculture. White settlers proved loathe to see the Indians establish any enterprise that might compete with or draw business away from them. Government policy reflected the economic interests of the new settlers, not the Indians.

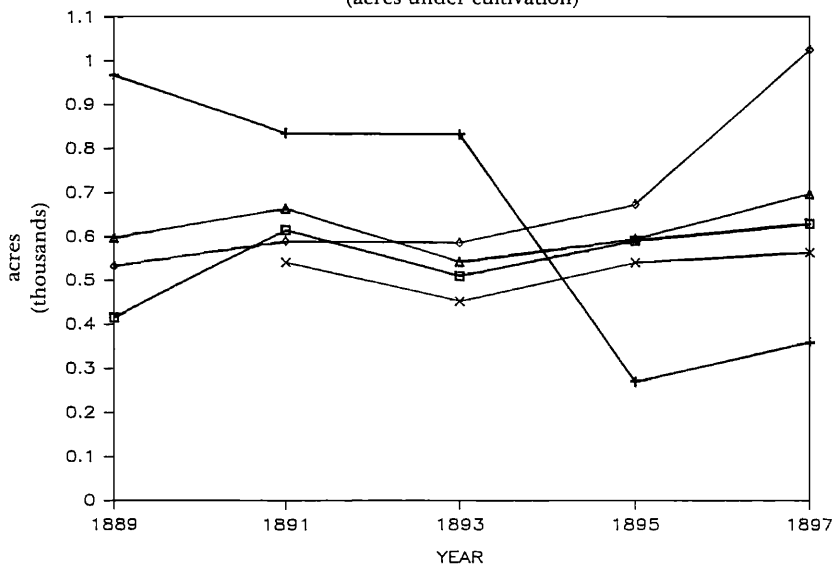
This pattern was all too common in the British colonial world of the late nineteenth century. In Kenya, for example, the colonial administration assumed that the most effective way to exploit the country's vast resources was to establish a viable community of immigrant white farmers.<sup>106</sup> The economic interests of the indigenous population were thus not advanced, and African agriculture was systematically suppressed. Roads and railways by-passed African reserves, denying access to markets. Heavy taxation prevented the accumulation of capital necessary for efficient agriculture, ensuring instead a steady flow of cheap labour. Africans in Kenya were forbidden to grow coffee, the most lucrative cash crop.

In South Africa, an African 'peasantry' emerged, responded posi-

105 See Sarah Carter, 'Agriculture and Agitation on the Oak River Reserve, 1875–1895,' *Manitoba History* 6 (1983): 2–9.

106 See Richard D. Wolff, *The Economics of Colonialism: Britain and Kenya, 1870–1930* (New Haven 1974), and E.A. Brett, *Colonialism and Underdevelopment in East Africa: The Politics of Economic Change, 1919–1939* (London 1973).

FIGURE 1  
Saskatchewan Indian Agencies  
(acres under cultivation)



## Notes:

- |              |                 |
|--------------|-----------------|
| □ Onion Lake | △ Crooked Lakes |
| + Battleford | × Carlton       |
| ◇ Duck Lake  |                 |

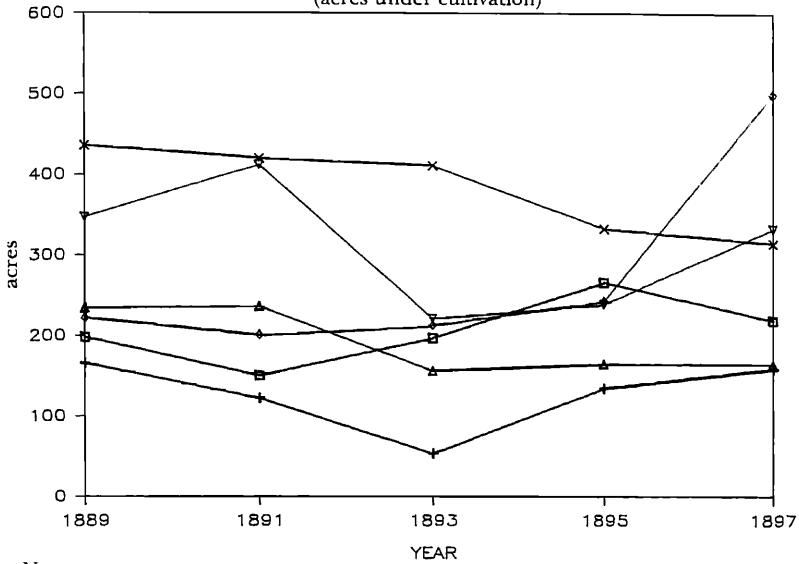
tively to the new colonial market economy in the nineteenth century, and began to account for a large share of the agricultural exports.<sup>107</sup> But this stage was shortlived. The price for competing too successfully with white farmers was a barrage of legislative measures designed to inhibit African farming while white agriculture was aided by a massive program of grants and subsidies. By the 1880s peasant production began to decline, and once fertile agricultural communities became pockets of rural poverty.

Similarly, in western Canada, measures like the permit system, severalty, and peasant farming combined to undermine and atrophy agricultural development on reserves. The administration acted not to promote the agriculture of the indigenous population but to provide an optimum environment for the immigrant settler. Comparisons between the situation in colonial Africa and western Canada, however, remain dubious as the Africans were always in the majority. Yet in the 1880s and 1890s the west was sparsely settled by non-Indians, and there was a similar anxiety to see an immigrant farming class established. After 1885 immigration to the west was at a virtual

107 Colin Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (Berkeley 1979)



FIGURE 2  
Saskatchewan Indian Agencies  
(acres under cultivation)



Notes:

- |                  |                   |
|------------------|-------------------|
| □ Moose Mountain | △ File Hills      |
| + Fort Pelly     | × Muscowpetung    |
| ◇ Assiniboine    | ▽ Touchwood Hills |

standstill and the drought years of the 1880s did little to attract settlers. Consideration was not given to the possibility of enhancing Indian production as a means of creating an export sector, although it was grumbled in an 1892 item in the *Regina Leader* that it would be preferable to make farmers of Indians and have them settle on empty lands than to bring in 'Russians and Jews.'<sup>108</sup> Instead, new settlers were to be attracted, and policies were determined by the need to maintain the viability of this community.

Large-scale settler agriculture in Africa required access to cheap labour. Policies that were aimed at suppressing African production were also intended to force Africans into the labour market. This situation did not prevail in western Canada, where the single-family homestead became the principal economic unit. It is worth noting, however, that in the 1890s Reed promoted the Indians of the Northwest, particularly the graduates of industrial schools, as a cheap labour supply for farm or domestic work.<sup>109</sup> This was a clear message

<sup>108</sup> *Regina Leader*, 10 Oct. 1892

<sup>109</sup> Jacqueline Judith Kennedy, 'Qu'Appelle Industrial School: White "Rites" for the Indians of the Old North-West' (MA thesis, Carleton University, 1970), 116-23

broadcast at national and international fairs, exhibitions, and displays aimed at prospective settlers.

In the United States, government policy of the 1880s led to a marked decline in Indian farming.<sup>110</sup> Before general allotment was enacted in 1887 there was a steady growth of reservation agriculture, but this was followed by stagnation and regression. American Indian policy, though distinct from Canadian in many ways, was similarly shaped by non-Indian economic interests.

Not surprisingly, there had been very little progress made in reserve farming during the 1890s. There was a modest increase in acreage on some reserves, while on others acreage stayed at about the same level or even decreased (see figures 1 and 2). The likelihood of agriculture forming the basis of a stable reserve economy faded even further after 1896, as the new administrators of Indian Affairs promoted land surrender and so further limited the agricultural capacity of reserves. Because much Indian land appeared to be 'idle,' 'unused,' or 'surplus,' the hand of those who clamoured for land surrender was strengthened. Indians were living in some cases in the midst of fine farm land that was not cultivated at all, or was worked with obsolete methods and technology. Indians appeared to cling stubbornly to the past and remain impervious to 'progressive' influences. People concluded that Indians lacked industry and were not natural farmers. These observations, reflected in the histories that have been written until very recently, obscure or overlook the Indians' positive response to agriculture in earlier years. Equally obscured and forgotten has been the role of Canadian government policy in restricting and undermining reserve agriculture in a critical period of agricultural development.

110 Leonard A. Carlson, *Indians, Bureaucrats and Land: The Dawes Act and the Decline of Indian Farming* (Westport 1981)