

**“To be Useful to the Whiteman and the  
Indian  
and the Country at Large”:  
Constantine Scollen, Missionary-Priest, and  
Native-White Relations in the West,  
1862-1885**

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Most early historical accounts of Roman Catholic missionary activities in Western Canada were overwhelmingly hagiographic in nature. Written either by the participants themselves or by Church historians who sympathized with the goals of the missionaries and relied uncritically on missionary records, evangelical efforts were documented and evaluated from the perspective of the clergy. Individual missionaries were typically portrayed as divinely-inspired, courageous, and self-sacrificing men who endured countless hardships to bring the boon of true religion and superior civilization to the pagan and primitive Indians. The larger story of the conversion of Aboriginal people was presented as a glorious chapter in the global expansion of the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1960s, however, scholarly writing on the subject has largely become the preserve of secular academics and has been influenced by changing intellectual trends within the discipline of history. In particular, scholarship in the area has been informed by the new social history approach which challenged historians to concern themselves with the

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<sup>1</sup> A.A. Taché, *Vingt Années de Missions dans le Nord-Ouest-de L’Amérique* (Montreal: Eusèbe Senécal, 1866); P. Duchaussios, *Mid Snow and Ice: The Apostles of the North-West* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1923); J.E. Champagne, *Les Missions Catholique dans l’Ouest-Canadien, 1818-1875* (Ottawa: Editions des Études Oblates, 1949); and P.E. Breton, *The Big Chief of the Prairies: The Life of Father Lacombe* (Edmonton: Palm Publishers, 1955).

daily lives of ordinary people in the past and the interdisciplinary methodology of ethnohistory which led to a focus on Native people as active agents in their historical interactions with Europeans. The result has been the emergence of a much more sophisticated and complex analysis of Catholic evangelism as a process of cultural interaction which occurred within the larger context of Aboriginal-European contact, accommodation, and conflict in North America.<sup>2</sup>

By interrogating the activities of Catholic missionaries in the West from the perspective both of the evangelizers and those they sought to convert, recent scholarship has challenged many traditional assumptions and in the process has also given rise to significant interpretive debate. This divergence in interpretation is clearly exemplified in the two most notable recent additions to the literature.

Robert Choquette's *The Oblate Assault on the Canadian North West* employs a military paradigm in analyzing Oblate missionaries and their relationships with Aboriginal people in the West.<sup>3</sup> Describing the Order as an "expanding regiment of Catholic conquerors intent on winning Canada's North West for Catholicism," he argues that the Oblates were at the "cutting edge of a conquest whose objectives and battle strategy were set by Euro-Canadian ultramontane Catholicism."<sup>4</sup> Although Choquette allows that "most missionaries led honest, honourable and generous lives of Christian witness," he emphasizes their determination to obliterate traditional Aboriginal culture and spirituality, and insists that there was little difference between the Oblates, various Protestant

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<sup>2</sup> Although it does not focus exclusively on Catholic missionaries in the West, the most significant general study of Christian missionary activity in Canada is J.W. Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter Since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984). See also M. McCarthy, "To Evangelize the Nations: Roman Catholic Missions in Manitoba, 1818-1870," *Papers in Manitoba History, Report Number 2* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation Historic Resources, 1990); R. Huel (ed), *Western Oblate Studies/Etudes Oblates de l'Ouest* (Edmonton: Western Canadian Publishers, 1990); R. Huel, *Western Oblate Studies 2/Etudes Oblates de l'Ouest 2* (Centre for the Study of North American Religion Series Number One) (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon Press, 1992); R. Huel, *Western Oblate Studies 3/Etudes Oblates de l'Ouest 3* (Edmonton: Western Canadian Publishers, 1994); and D. Lavasseur, *Les Oblats de Marie Immaculée dans l'Ouest et le Nord du Canada, 1845-1967* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1994). See also the works cited in notes 3 and 6 below.

<sup>3</sup> R. Choquette, *The Oblate Assault on Canada's Northwest* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 and 21.

missionaries, and government officials.<sup>5</sup> All were partners in the colonization and assimilation of Aboriginals and in subjugating them to a social order predicated on Euro-Canadian cultural, social, and spiritual values.

Raymond Huel's *Proclaiming the Gospel to the Indian and Métis* covers virtually the same ground, but posits a very different interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Huel concedes that the Oblate approach to Aboriginal culture and spirituality "reflected the exclusive and intolerant nature of Christianity," that the conversion techniques which they employed instilled in young Indians a "contempt for ancestral traditions," and that full conversion to Catholicism was tantamount to committing "cultural suicide" for Aboriginal people.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Huel states that the Oblates also served as fathers, guides, and protectors to Aboriginal communities.<sup>8</sup> In bringing Christianity and civilization to the Indians and Métis, he argues that the missionaries genuinely believed they were both acting in the best interests of Natives and saving them from extinction in the process. Moreover, he insists that after the advent of large-scale White settlement in the West, the Oblates acted as the guardians of Aboriginal interests and "admonished those who dealt with the Native community to abide by the principles of justice and equity."<sup>9</sup> Most importantly, Huel cautions that the "Oblates were the product of a specific age and culture and their outlook, values and aspirations were conditioned by that experience."<sup>10</sup>

Recent historiographical interpretations of Catholic evangelism are thus polemicized around the relationship between Christian conversion and the wider colonization and assimilation of Aboriginal people which occurred in the late nineteenth century. In broad terms this debate contrasts depictions of missionaries as altruistic servants to, and benevolent guardians of, their Aboriginal flocks, with assessments of the same missionaries as enthusiastic collaborators in a larger campaign of cultural genocide against Aboriginal people.<sup>11</sup> The following analysis of Constantine Scollen, an Oblate who served in the West from 1861-1885, is presented as a case study to explore the ambiguous relationship

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 197 and 188.

<sup>6</sup> R. Huel, *Proclaiming the Gospel to the Indians and Métis* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 83, 106, and 77.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., especially 199-222.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>11</sup> J. Axtell, "Some Thoughts on the Ethnohistory of Missions," *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 29 (1) (1982), 35-41.

between missionaries and Aboriginal people which has been identified by previous authors. It argues that the debate over whether or not missionaries were anything more than agents of colonialism is excessively simplistic because it reduces an extraordinarily complex social and cultural phenomenon to an entry on the plus or minus side of the historical ledger. Furthermore, it suggests that the key to understanding the complexity of missionary-Indian encounters lies in an appreciation of the genuinely ambivalent role of missionaries *both* as deliberate agents of enforced culture change and as altruistic buffers between Aboriginal people and the dislocating effects of the forces of colonialism.

Constantine Scollen was born in County Fermanagh, Ireland, in 1841 and he joined the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in 1858 at Sicklinghall in northern England. Two years later he was sent to Dublin to teach, but the young novice had larger ambitions, and, possibly because of communications with his uncle, Monsignor Thomas Connelly, Archbishop of Halifax, an abiding desire to come to Canada. Early in 1862 he applied to serve in the Oblate missions in Western Canada and arrived in Fort Edmonton in the fall of that year to establish the first elementary school in what would become the province of Alberta. For the next quarter century Scollen resided at various centres throughout the West, including St. Albert, Hobbema, Lac St. Anne, Lac La Biche, Rocky Mountain House, Calgary, Edmonton, Battleford, and Winnipeg.<sup>12</sup>

Scollen's residence in the West coincided with a series of momentous internal and external changes. These included the end of the fur trade and the incorporation of the Hudson Bay Company's Rupert's Land into the Canadian federation as the North West Territories, the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the influx of white settlers, and the resulting transformation of the northern prairies into a commercial agricultural society.<sup>13</sup> While these developments created opportunities for many, they also had a profoundly dislocating effect on the Aboriginal population. The dramatic decline of the buffalo herds and the arrival of white settlers placed enormous strains on the traditional lifestyle of the Plains nations, leading to the negotiation of treaties with the Canadian government in the 1870s. These agreements brought further changes, including the switch from Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal control of

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<sup>12</sup> Biographical information and a brief account of Scollen's missionary career is provided in B. Venini, "Father Constantine Scollen, Founder of the Calgary Mission," *Canadian Catholic Historical Association, Study Sessions (SS)*, Vol. 9 (1942), 75-86.

<sup>13</sup> G. Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 129-241.

resources, the confinement of Natives to reserves, and the implementation of Federal government assimilationist policies designed to transform them from nomadic hunters to sedentary Christian agriculturalists.<sup>14</sup>

In his various capacities as missionary, priest, teacher, doctor, translator, interpreter, advisor, and diplomat, Scollen was both a keen observer of and an active participant in these changes. Typical of missionaries generally, the Irishman maintained an extensive correspondence which provides a wealth of information on the changing dynamics of Native-White relations in the West during this critical period. Most significantly, perhaps, his close relationship with Aboriginals afforded him unique insights into the ways in which Native people responded to the profound transformation of their world.

When Scollen arrived in the West the Plains nations, in particular the Blackfoot, were in his later words, “a proud, haughty, numerous people,” autonomous and self-sufficient.<sup>15</sup> Yet even at this early date there were indications that Aboriginal hegemony was not entirely secure. Blackfoot and Cree bands in the vicinity of Fort Edmonton were already expressing concern over the decline of the buffalo herds, and Scollen noted that some were “commencing to cultivate the land, so that when the buffalo fail, they may have plenty to support themselves.”<sup>16</sup> In later years Scollen reported “great fears of famine” and growing conflict between the Blackfoot, Cree, and Métis over the dwindling resources which came to a head at the Battle of Belly River in 1870.<sup>17</sup> The decline of the buffalo and the arrival of increasing numbers of white settlers were the most significant threats to Aboriginal autonomy, but these were also accompanied by other deadly afflictions. In the mid 1860s a thriving whiskey trade developed in Whoop-Up country, with very demoralizing effects for

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<sup>14</sup> H. Dempsey, *Big Bear: The End of Freedom* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1984); W. Hildebrandt et al., *The True Spirit and Original Intent of Treaty Seven* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996); O.P. Dickason, *Canada’s First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 257-91; and J.L. Taylor, “The Development of an Indian Policy for the Canadian North-West, 1869-70,” (Ph.D. Thesis, Queen’s University, 1975).

<sup>15</sup> National Archives of Canada (NA) Indian Affairs, R.G. 10, Vol. 3695. C. Scollen to Major Irvine, 12 April 1879.

<sup>16</sup> Glenbow Archives NA 4917 Scollen Family Papers (Henceforth GASFP). C. Scollen to Bp. Taché, 24 December 1862.

<sup>17</sup> A. Johnston (ed), *The Battle at Belly River: Stories of the Last Great Indian Battle* (Lethbridge: Lethbridge Historical Society, 1966).

Aboriginals.<sup>18</sup> And as if this was not bad enough, all Plains groups were hit with a series of epidemics in the late 1860s, including the lethal smallpox, which caused huge mortality. Scollen reported that the trauma of these losses made the survivors even more susceptible to the lure of alcohol, further eroding the fabric of Plains societies:

Surviving relatives went more and more for the use of alcohol; they endeavoured to drown their grief in the poisonous beverage. They sold their robes and their horses by the hundred for it, and now they began killing one another, so that in a short time they were divided into several small parties, afraid to meet.<sup>19</sup>

Scollen, therefore, encountered the Cree and Blackfoot at a time of growing crisis, when their resource base was becoming increasingly vulnerable and external influences were undermining their cultural cohesiveness and political power. This situation was advantageous to missionaries, however, for given the inability of traditional systems to explain or stem the collapse, some Aboriginal people were more receptive than they might otherwise have been to the new religion.<sup>20</sup> The Oblates, in particular, were well positioned to avail of this opportunity.

According to Robert Choquette the early 1860s witnessed the “invasion of the West by the main Catholic missionary forces,” expanding on “beachheads” established by earlier “pathfinders.”<sup>21</sup> Scollen was among this second wave and in many respects he typified the more aggressive approach which the Oblates began to adopt. An early product of the Irish devotional revolution, Scollen shared with his predominantly French colleagues a profound belief that no salvation existed outside the Catholic Church and an unwavering determination to save Indian souls through baptism. Like most of his colleagues he was not concerned with theoretical or conceptual aspects of conversion but was, rather, a man of

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<sup>18</sup> P. Sharp, *Whoop-Up Country: The Canadian-American West, 1865-1885* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955).

<sup>19</sup> C. Scollen to Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba, September 8, 1876 quoted in A. Morris, *The Treaties of Canada with the Indians of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories*. (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1991), pp.249-51.

<sup>20</sup> J. Ronda, “‘We are Well as We Are’: An Indian Critique of Seventeenth Century Christian Missions,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 34 (4) (1977), 66-82. J. Axtell, “Some Thoughts on the Ethnohistory of Missions,” *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 29 (1) (1982), 35-41. M. Whitehead, “The Historic Role of Indian Cathecists in Oregon Territory and British Columbia,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, Vol. 72 (3) (1981), 98-106.

<sup>21</sup> R. Choquette, *Oblate Assault*, 45-7.

action.<sup>22</sup> He was young and robust and despite hypochondriacal tendencies was capable of enduring the rigours of constant travel often over great distances. He adapted easily to the itinerant mission style of proselytizing and he was one of the first Oblates to accompany the Cree to their winter camps and live with them for extended periods of time. Most importantly, perhaps, Scollen's flair for languages was an enormous asset in the Oblate strategy of facilitating conversion by preaching to the Natives in their own tongues. The young novice spoke English and French upon arrival and he quickly demonstrated an extraordinary proficiency in Aboriginal languages. Over the course of his career he learned to speak the Cree, Blackfoot, Piegan, and Michif languages with varying degrees of fluency. He assisted his more famous colleague Albert Lacombe in developing Cree dictionaries and grammars and in translating Scripture and sermons into the Cree and Blackfoot languages. He also served as an Aboriginal language instructor to other missionaries.<sup>23</sup>

Scollen therefore demonstrated a willingness to accommodate himself to certain aspects of Aboriginal culture, but he shared the general Oblate belief that the true conversion of Native people also required their "civilization" through the adoption of certain aspects of Euro-Canadian culture. At Fort Edmonton and later at Notre-Dame de la Paix on the Bow River, he laboured to teach young Cree and Blackfoot children the rudiments of the English language to prepare them for employment with the Hudson's Bay Company. Moreover, he sought to impress upon his charges the superiority of sedentary agriculture over their traditional migratory lifestyle.<sup>24</sup>

Scollen's intimate relations with the Cree and Blackfoot and his ability to communicate with them in their own languages earned him a measure of trust and also allowed him privileged insights into Aboriginal cultures and world views. As a result he became a vital source of information both to his superiors and to government officials on the various Aboriginal groups with whom he lived and worked. Scollen described his role of broker or intermediary between the two groups in the following terms:

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<sup>22</sup> R. Huel, *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> B. Venini, "Father Constantine Scollen," 77-8.

<sup>24</sup> GASFP, C. Scollen to Bishop Taché, 24 December 1862; 7 January 1864; 29 December 1864. NA, R.G. 10, Vol. 3695, File 14942, C. Scollen to Major Irvine, 13 April 1879.

For my own part I have always confined myself to explaining to the Indian, from a Christian point of view, the relation existing between the whiteman and himself, and to giving the whiteman the information which to my mind seemed necessary for the proper government of the Indian. I have done so with only one view, and that is to be useful to the whiteman and the Indian, and the country at large.<sup>25</sup>

The intimate knowledge which Scollen accumulated during his first fifteen years in the West and his desire to act as a broker between Aboriginal leaders and White officials was especially evident during the negotiation of the prairie treaties. Plains chiefs chose to enter into these agreements in response to the rapid collapse of their traditional economy, the ravages of disease, and the influx of white settlers. Faced with this situation some Aboriginal leaders concluded that an accommodation with selected aspects of Euro-Canadian culture, in particular agriculture, education, and medicine, was essential to renewed self-sufficiency and the long term survival and prosperity of their people.<sup>26</sup> Thus they approached the treaties as a mechanism for establishing a relationship with the Crown which would provide certain guarantees for the future in return for allowing White settlement on their territories. Other chiefs were less sanguine about such changes, however, preferring to salvage the traditional buffalo culture and maintain their territorial integrity. Christian missionaries played a vital role in the delicate treaty negotiations and Scollen was one of the the Roman Catholic representatives at the Treaty Six deliberations at Fort Carlton in August 1876.<sup>27</sup> As well as providing church services and performing baptisms, he used his influence and linguistic skills to persuade the chiefs of the merits of the treaty. Most significantly, he ensured that the respected Cree chief, Sweetgrass, a Christian convert known to be in favour of an accommodation with the

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<sup>25</sup> NA, RG 10, Vol. 3695, File 14942, C. Scollen to Major Irvine, 13 April 1879.

<sup>26</sup> W. Hildebrandt et al., *True Spirit*; J.L. Taylor, "Canada's Northwest Indian Policy in the 1870s: Traditional Premises and Necessary Innovations," in J.R. Miller (ed), *Sweet Promises: A Reader on Indian White Relations in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 207-11; R. Price, *The Spirit of the Alberta Indian Treaties* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1980); and J. Friesen, "Magnificent Gifts: The Treaties of Canada with the Indians of the Northwest, 1869-70," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, Series 5*. Volume I, 1986, 41-51.

<sup>27</sup> C. Roberto, "Quelques Réflexions sur les relations entre les Oblats, les populations autochtones et le gouvernement avant et après la signature des traités 6,7 et 8," in R. Huel (ed.), *Western Oblate Studies 4/Études Oblats de l'Ouest 4* (Edmonton: Western Canadian Publishers, 1996), 77-94.

government, was present at the subsequent negotiations at Fort Pitt.<sup>28</sup> Given the strong opposition of traditionalists such as Chief Big Bear at the latter meeting, it is obvious that the missionary's role was not an insignificant factor in the successful conclusion of that treaty.

Scollen's involvement in the negotiations at Fort Carleton brought him to the attention of the Minister of the Interior, David Mills, who requested that he provide a report on the "character, habits and condition of the [Blackfoot nation]" to assist the government in its preparations for negotiating a treaty with them. This report, which Scollen submitted immediately, was a curious document, combining an obviously genuine concern for the difficulties facing the Blackfoot with an extremely unflattering portrayal of their culture. In describing the hardship caused by the decline of the buffalo, the whiskey trade, and disease, Scollen confessed that it "was painful to me to see the state of poverty to which they had been reduced."<sup>29</sup> But this sympathy did not extend to certain of their cultural traits. He described the Blackfoot as a group "whose thirst for blood and ... other barbarous passions were constantly fired to the highest pitch of frenzy" and whose traditional buffalo economy made them "the most helpless Indians in the country."<sup>30</sup> He concluded by stressing the beneficial effects of a treaty both for Natives and White settlers and warning of possible military resistance from the Blackfoot if the government was tardy in its overtures.

The treaty with the Blackfoot Confederacy was negotiated at Blackfoot Crossing in September of 1877 and Scollen was an energetic presence. In his own words:

"I set up my tent in the midst of [this] crowd and immediately began religious instruction, catechising, baptising and confessing a good number of the poor Indians. At the same time I made it my duty not to miss a single meeting relative to the treaty."<sup>31</sup>

Scollen seems to have concentrated his efforts on the Cree bands, serving as an interpreter and translator in the negotiations. His efforts were rewarded when the Cree signed an adhesion to Treaty Six with Scollen's signature on the treaty as one of the witnesses.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> A. Morris, *The Treaties of Canada*, 183.

<sup>29</sup> A. Morris, *The Treaties of Canada*, 248.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 248 and 249.

<sup>31</sup> GASFP C. Scollen to Father Leduc, 5 June 1879.

<sup>32</sup> A. Morris, *The Treaties of Canada*, 374.

Typical of most other missionaries in the West, therefore, Scollen was an enthusiastic proponent of the treaties because of the prospects of a better life which they held out for Native people. Like the pro-treaty chiefs, missionaries believed that the survival of Aboriginals depended on the adoption of agriculture and education and during the negotiations they strove to ensure that agreements were successfully concluded. Genuine altruism was thus a factor in their endorsement of the treaties, but more self-serving motives were also present. Scollen justified his involvement in the negotiation of Treaties Six and Seven on the grounds of “their grave consequences for the conversion of the poor Indians.”<sup>33</sup> One of the chief logistical impediments experienced by the early Christian missionaries was the nomadic lifestyle of Aboriginals. Since the treaties were a prelude to the removal of Aboriginals to reserves and the development of a sedentary lifestyle, they thus greatly expedited the program of the evangelists.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, whether Aboriginal negotiators understood or not, the Numbered treaties effected a massive transfer of resources from Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal control and were the instruments by which the government of Canada asserted their sovereignty over Native people in the West. In a larger sense, therefore, Scollen was also an active agent in what historian Edward Said has described as “the struggle over geography” which characterized nineteenth century European imperialism.<sup>35</sup> This process not only involved physical conquest and expropriation of resources, but also the creation and dissemination of negative images of indigenous populations to justify and legitimize those actions. Although Scollen’s primary allegiance was to the universal Roman Catholic Church, and he genuinely believed himself to be acting in the best interests of Aboriginal peoples, whether consciously or not, he was an integral part of the new order in the West which flowed from the Canadian federal government’s national policy. Like the North West Mounted Police, surveyors and other government officials, as well as the bulk of white settlers, he saw Native culture as backward and inferior, doomed to be replaced by a new social order whose tenets were fundamentally antithetical to Aboriginal traditions.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> GASFP. C. Scollen to Father Leduc, 5 June 1879.

<sup>34</sup> GASFP Report of Father Leduc, 1879.

<sup>35</sup> E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 5-11.

<sup>36</sup> For a comparison of Scollen’s views of Aboriginals with those of Protestant missionaries see S. Carter, “The Missionaries’ Indian: Publications of John McDougall, John Maclean and Egerton Ryerson Young,” *Prairie Forum*, Vol. 9 (1) (1984), 27-44.

In the years after Treaty Seven, Scollen's main focus was on the establishment of missions among Aboriginal bands, assisting their transition to reserve life, and exposing them to Catholicism to prepare them to take their place in the new social order where settlers were becoming dominant. But while post-treaty Indian administration is often portrayed as a partnership between state and church, in Scollen's case it was a very uneasy relationship as he became an outspoken critic of the way in which government policy was being implemented.<sup>37</sup> Scollen demonstrated a genuine commitment to the welfare of the people he sought to convert and was frequently outraged by the failure of government officials to deliver on treaty promises. The missionary obviously felt his own reputation with the Indians to be jeopardized and he developed a strong sympathy for what might be termed an "Aboriginal-rights" interpretation of the treaties. In the eyes of government officials, he became increasingly identified with the cause of Aboriginals and was treated as an object of suspicion and hostility.

The immediate post-treaty period was extremely difficult for Aboriginals as the buffalo herds declined precipitously and the transition to reserve life proved unexpectedly difficult. Apparently unprepared for the near disappearance of the buffalo, the Department of the Interior was slow to begin surveying reserves and distributing the agricultural assistance promised in the treaties. The result was growing distress on the part of Native people and increasing frustration with the government. Scollen witnessed this situation first-hand, working in the Piegan camps at Belly River, and he was also present at Fort McLeod in August of 1878, when serious tension developed between the Blackfoot and Indian Commissioner Edgar Dewdney during the treaty payments.<sup>38</sup> The following year saw the total disappearance of the buffalo from the northern prairies and Scollen's work among the Blackfoot, Blood, Piegans, and Sarcees brought him face to face with their destitution. Writing to Major Irvine of the North West Mounted Police in April 1879, he informed him that for virtually the first time in his knowledge, many members of Treaty Seven bands were now dying from hunger, and most were in a state of extreme want:

Many sustained life by eating the flesh of poisoned wolves, some have lived on dogs; and I have known others to live several days on nothing

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<sup>37</sup> J.R. Miller, "Owen Glendower, Hotspur and Canadian Indian Policy," in J.R. Miller (ed), *Sweet Promises*, 323-52, and B. Titley, *A Narrow Vision: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Administration of Indian Affairs in Canada*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986), 5, 75-8.

<sup>38</sup> GASFP Extract from Father Doucet's Memoirs, 5 June 1879.

else but old bones which they gathered and broke up, wherewith to make a kind of soup.<sup>39</sup>

Scollen placed the responsibility for this situation squarely on the government's failure to provide the assistance, especially ploughs and seed, promised in the treaties and he pointed out the hypocrisy of this situation:

Is it not strange that the Dominion Government who [sic] can endow a man with the power to hang another for murder, has not endowed the Lieutenant Governor with the power to grant so paltry a thing as the above, which might be the means of saving a few Indians from starvation?<sup>40</sup>

In his letter to Irvine, Scollen further suggested that the Blackfoot had not fully understood the "real nature" of Treaty Seven, especially the clauses dealing with land surrender, and that from their perspective the agreement "simply meant to furnish them with plenty of food and clothing ... every time they stood in need of them."<sup>41</sup> Having assumed a legal responsibility, Scollen argued that the government was now obligated to follow through, or the consequences would be dire.

Scollen's prediction of Native unrest was confirmed that summer when Big Bear and other anti-treaty chiefs began efforts to create a pan-Indian alliance combining the Cree, Blackfoot, and Sioux to renegotiate the treaties on more favourable terms, and rumours spread of impending attacks on white settlements and police posts. Scollen's intercession was requested by Edgar Dewdney, apparently because he believed that the "Indians trusted the priest more than any other white man," and this confidence was repeated by the Blood Chief Red Crow, who specifically asked that Scollen act as interpreter.<sup>42</sup> Although Scollen may have exaggerated when he claimed sole responsibility for averting an outbreak of war, it is clear that his intervention did contribute to the restoration of calm at the time.

Relations between Aboriginals in the West and government officials deteriorated even further in the following years, however, as starvation among Native people became widespread and Indian Department officials adopted an increasingly unsympathetic and uncompromising approach to their wards. Native leaders complained that the long-promised

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<sup>39</sup> NA, RG10, Vol. 3695, File 14942, C. Scollen to Major Irvine, 13 April 1879.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> GASFP Extract from Father Doucet's Memoirs, 5 June 1879.

agricultural assistance failed to materialize and the already meagre government rations were further reduced as part of a departmental retrenchment policy. Especially obnoxious was the “work for food” program introduced by Edgar Dewdney, designed in part to force Indians to remain on their reserves and thus curtail their mobility and diplomatic efforts.<sup>43</sup> In the fall of that year, Scollen was moved to the Edmonton area and he found his old friends the Cree, especially the chiefs, nearing desperation. Unable to secure redress from the government and smarting from their insensitive and disrespectful treatment at the hands of the local Indian Agent, nine chiefs approached Scollen in January of 1883 and requested him to write a letter on their behalf to the *Edmonton Bulletin* to publicize their grievances.<sup>44</sup> This letter has become one of the most frequently quoted statements of Indian protest in the post-treaty years. It also embroiled its author in an acrimonious dispute with Indian Department officials and confirmed Scollen’s reputation in their estimation as a meddling troublemaker.

The essence of the chiefs’ complaints was that both the spirit and the letter of the treaties had been broken by the government:

When the government representatives came to make a treaty with us, they said it was in the name of the great mother. The conditions were mutually agreed to. We understood them to be inviolable and in the presence of the Great Spirit reciprocally binding; that neither party could be guilty of a breach with impunity. But alas! how simple we were! we have found to our cost that the binding exists all on one side, and the impunity on the other. A condition on the part of the government is to furnish us with a number of farming implements and cattle ... now during the six years that we have been in the treaty the officers acting for the government have robbed us of more than one half of these things on which we were to depend for a living, and they are not punished according to law. They can break their engagements on behalf of the great mother with impunity. ...if no attention is paid to our case now we shall conclude that the treaty made with us six years ago was a meaningless matter of form and that the white man has indirectly doomed us to annihilation little by little.<sup>45</sup>

This letter contained a very strong assertion of the Aboriginal interpretation of the treaties as establishing a mutually beneficial relationship with

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<sup>43</sup> J.L. Tobias, “Canada’s Subjugation of the Plains Cree,” in J.R. Miller, *Sweet Promises*, 216-20, and I. Andrews, “Indian Protest Against Starvation: The Yellow Calf Incident of 1884,” *Saskatchewan History*, Vol. 28 (1975), 4-52.

<sup>44</sup> NA, RG 10, Vol. 3673, File 10986, C.Scollen to E. Dewdney, 17 March 1884.

<sup>45</sup> *Edmonton Bulletin*, 3 February 1883.

reciprocal obligations between themselves and the government and it was a scathing indictment of the latter's failure to live up to its side of the bargain."<sup>46</sup> Local officials were embarrassed and outraged by its publication and as the messenger of the chiefs' grievances, Scollen was singled out for particular abuse. The Indian Agent at Edmonton House, William Anderson, reported that in his meetings with the chiefs, Scollen had "used language calculated to excite them to disturb the peace," and specifically that he had "on Sunday the 4<sup>th</sup> of Jan last assembled the Chiefs and Headmen of this district and advised them to go armed and demand of me supplies which he knew perfectly well I could not procure here, nor which the government would allow me to grant."<sup>47</sup> Since this, allegedly, was not the first occasion on which Scollen had given such intemperate advice, Anderson demanded of his superiors that steps should now be taken "to stop the man from plotting against the government." He informed Scollen's superior, the Bishop of St. Albert, Monsignor Grandin, that he should "compel the Reverend Mr. Scollen to cease making trouble among the Indians or leave this District or that I should be compelled to have him arrested."<sup>48</sup>

Although the Oblate hierarchy in the West was not entirely pleased with Scollen's outspokenness, they nevertheless supported his position and the incident soon blew over.<sup>49</sup> But the episode clearly revealed the worsening situation in the West and the growing frustration among Aboriginals with government policy and personnel. Not surprisingly, this frustration generated support for Big Bear's campaign to unite all the tribes in order to renegotiate the treaties, and the situation was further complicated in May of 1884 when Louis Riel returned from Montana to rally both the Métis and reserve Indians. Apparently undeterred by his recent confrontation, Scollen endorsed the growing assertiveness being demonstrated by Aboriginal leaders, and though unsympathetic to Big Bear, he welcomed Riel's return and offered him his assistance.<sup>50</sup> Scollen insisted, however, that the campaign should be "conducted within the

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<sup>46</sup> NA, RG 10, Vol. 3673, File 10986, W. Anderson to Bishop Grandin, 20 February 1883.

<sup>47</sup> For an analysis of Aboriginal concepts of Treaty rights see J.L. Tobias, "The Origins of the Treaty Rights Movement in Saskatchewan," in F.L. Barron and J. Waldram (eds), *1885 and After: Native Society in Transition*, (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1986), 241-52.

<sup>48</sup> NA, RG 10, Vol. 3673, File 10986, W. Anderson to E. Dewdney, 8 February 1883.

<sup>49</sup> NA, RG 10, Vol. 3673, File 10986, Bishop Grandin to E. Dewdney, 6 November 1883.

<sup>50</sup> GASFP, C. Scollen to Louis Riel, 10 November 1884.

limits of lawful agitation,” and like other members of the Church he distanced himself from Riel when the Métis leader moved to an increasingly militant position in early 1885.<sup>51</sup>

The fateful spring of 1885 found Scollen on the Bear’s Hill Reserve near Edmonton, ministering to the Cree bands of chiefs Bob Tail, Ermineskin, and Samson. As news of the Métis victories at Fish Creek and Duck Lake and the massacre of his fellow priests at Frog Lake spread west, he found himself in an extremely dangerous situation. The Farm Instructor and all other whites fled the area and this convinced many of the Natives that “Louis Riel was about to pass through with an army sweeping everything before him and that the days of the Whiteman were at last numbered in the Northwest.”<sup>52</sup> Whereas Scollen had previously counseled Natives to become more outspoken and even to arm themselves in defense of their rights, he now used all his energies to prevent them from joining in the Rebellion because of the “fearful consequences which would inevitably follow.”<sup>53</sup> In this Scollen was supported by the chiefs, but the bitterness felt by many of the young men could not be contained. A war dance was held, followed by the pillaging of the Hudson’s Bay Company stores and immediately the entire population of surrounding reserves congregated in one large camp on a war footing.

Scollen, however, was not intimidated and even allowing for self-aggrandizement, his account of what transpired next demonstrated his capacity for enormous personal courage:

Armed with the Government’s letter and accompanied by the Halfbreeds I went to the camp ... The young rascals who had caused all this annoyance saw my object and kept up the war dance as a protest that they would not listen. The whole of the people, men, women and children were gathered around the dancing lodge - I tried several times to get a hearing, but all to no purpose. The drums rolled, the young scoundrels fire [sic] shots over my head and shouts went forth of No Surrender and Riel! Riel! I whispered a few words to Bob Tail ... He jumped and made a raid on the drums and in two minutes scattered the crowd who were making such a noise. I took the floor at once. This was all I wanted. I knew I could hold them once I got a hearing. I kept them for two hours until I had left nothing unsaid ... I saw I had broken their spirit and then I poured at them all the spleen with which they had been filling my heart during the few previous days. The dispatch was that they seemed penitent for all that they had done. They returned the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> GASFP, C. Scollen to Father Lacombe, 20 April 1885.

<sup>53</sup> GASFP, C. Scollen to E. Dewdney, 23 May 1885.

goods they had taken from the Company, the camp broke up, and now they are hard at work like good and faithful subjects.<sup>54</sup>

Scollen therefore played a vital role in maintaining the peace in the Edmonton area during the 1885 Rebellion and his success in this endeavour, especially given the violence shown to other missionaries, was a testament to the relationship which he had established with Aboriginals. As he explained: “The Natives have great confidence in me because they say that I have never deceived them and that I have never flattered the great English leaders, nor am I afraid to speak up loudly for the rights of the poor.”<sup>55</sup> His intervention was clearly motivated not by a lack of sympathy for Native grievances but by concern for the consequences which would follow; and given the retribution meted out by the Indian Department to those bands which did participate in the Rebellion, it is obvious that his instincts were correct.<sup>56</sup> In his various reports on the incident at Bear’s Hill Reserve, Scollen took pains to emphasize that the agitation was the work of a small group of “troublemakers,” most of whom came from elsewhere, and to stress that the chiefs had done all in their power to prevent their people from engaging in precipitous action. He also showed remarkable insight into the difficulties faced by Native people in the transition to reserve life when he claimed that many of the young men were swept up in the agitation primarily because of their desire for “some excitement to assuage the monotony of husbandry life.”<sup>57</sup>

In the aftermath of the Rebellion, Scollen continued to act as an advocate for Natives and this was a stance which, in the hysterical and vengeful temper of the times, did not enhance his reputation with the white population. He supported the demand for clemency for Louis Riel and pressed for a government inquiry into the operation of the Indian Department. Such an inquiry, he claimed, would conclusively establish the legitimacy of Aboriginal grievances and reveal the culpability of certain government officials in provoking the Rebellion.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> GASFC, C. Scollen to Father Lacombe, 20 April 1885.

<sup>55</sup> GASFC, C. Scollen to Father Lacombe, 10 May 1885.

<sup>56</sup> For an excellent recent account of the 1885 resistance and the government’s harsh treatment of bands who were suspected of involvement, see B. Stonechild and W. Waiser, *Loyal Til Death: Indians and the Northwest Rebellion* (Calgary: Fifth House, 1997).

<sup>57</sup> GASFP, C. Scollen to Father Lacombe, 20 April 1885; C. Scollen to Bishop Grandin, 5 May 1885; and C. Scollen to E. Dewdney, 23 May 1885.

<sup>58</sup> G.A.S.F.P., C. Scollen to Father Lacombe, 3 July 1885.

Scollen's career in the West came to an abrupt end in July 1885, however, when he left the Oblates under a cloud of controversy. As an Irish-born English-speaker, he was an anomaly among the predominantly French-speaking Oblates, and these ethnic and linguistic differences were a constant source of friction with his colleagues and superiors. The Irishman also developed a reputation as a troublesome character given to excessive drinking, gambling, and running up debts and was considered to be a poor role model for his congregation.<sup>59</sup> After his departure from the Oblates, he moved to the United States and for the next decade served as a priest in a variety of parishes in Montana, Wyoming, Ohio, and Illinois. He died in Dayton, Ohio, in 1902 at age sixty.

When Scollen left Fort Edmonton in the summer of 1885, it bore little resemblance to the isolated trading post which had been his first residence on arrival twenty three years earlier. The Edmonton area and indeed the entire Canadian prairies had been utterly transformed in the intervening years by the transition from Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal hegemony. Scollen's participation in this transformation reveals the essential ambiguity of the missionary-Indian encounter for as a Christian evangelizer he was one of the standard bearers of the new Euro-Canadian social order while simultaneously labouring to shield Native people from the consequences of the changes which he wrought. Like his fellow Oblates, he behaved as a member of a conquering Catholic army with little apparent appreciation for the impact of that spiritual conquest on those he sought to convert. He was willing to collaborate with external agencies, especially the Canadian government, to forward the missionary agenda and this was particularly apparent during the treaty negotiations. Here he used his accumulated experience to persuade the chiefs of the merits of the treaties, despite his obvious awareness of the profound consequences which they would have for Aboriginal autonomy. In this respect Scollen was clearly an accomplice in the colonization of the Cree and Blackfoot nations.

While the government and the missionaries may have shared the same broad goals however, Scollen's activities in the post-treaty period suggest a clear divergence between Church and State with respect to Aboriginal people. Although he frequently expressed it in paternalistic language, Scollen demonstrated a genuine concern for the welfare of the people he worked with and he laboured tirelessly and often at great personal cost to ensure their equitable treatment. Because he saw first

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<sup>59</sup> G.A.S.F.P., C. Scollen to E. Dewdney, 13 August 1885, and G.A.S.F.P., Vincent Scollen, *Notes and Correspondence*, 1885.

hand the terrible consequences of government policy, especially the failure to implement many of the treaty promises, he became an outspoken critic of the Department of the Interior and a strong advocate of an Aboriginal rights interpretation of the treaties. In this sense he may truly be described as selfless and altruistic, a father, guide, and protector to Indian people. Constantine Scollen was, in short, a complex figure whose career defies easy categorization. In the context of missionary historiography, he deserves neither the unqualified adulation of the hagiographers nor the blanket condemnation of the revisionists. Perhaps it is enough to say that he sought at all times to be true to his personal motto: "To be useful to the whiteman and the Indian, and the country at large."