

LOST PEOPLE

Leo Pettipas
Manitoba Archaeological Society

According to traditional Native teachings, standard modern historiography, and recent archaeological research, Manitoba was exclusively the domain of Aboriginal peoples prior to the 17th-century CE. The conventional wisdom of today holds that no European of any description set foot anywhere on Manitoba soil until the early-1600s.

This point of-view has not always enjoyed universal acceptance, however. When 19th-century scholars were contemplating the origins of the North American Natives, their initial point of reference was the Bible and/or European tradition. And one theme that turns up repeatedly in the early writings is the "lost people" scenario.

A case in point was the belief that the Aboriginals were descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel. This line of thought is a good example of "putting two and two together" to come up with a solution.

On the one hand was the mystery of what happened to the ten tribes of Israel who, having disappeared into Assyrian bondage in the 8th Century BCE, receive no further mention in the Scriptures. On the other hand, the origins of the North American Natives — of whom no mention is made in the Bible — demanded an explanation as well.

For many, the logical conclusion was that the latter were the descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel, who presumably had escaped from the Assyrians and found their way to the Western Hemisphere.

Since the Israelites were Caucasians ("white"), it follows that, under this scenario, the Natives of this continent — including, of course, those who lived in Manitoba — must be of Caucasian background as well. Somehow, the obvious fact that the North American Natives were not Caucasian to begin with got overlooked by the proponents of this theory. Today, it holds no currency whatsoever in mainstream academia.

Another early theory that for most scholars has not stood the test of time has a part of eastern North America being occupied by a sizeable party of Welsh colonists well before the arrival of Columbus. Medieval tradition held that ten ships under the command of one Prince Madoc departed North Wales sometime in the early 14th-century CE and never returned (again, the lost people theme).

It was surmised that Madoc's small fleet crossed the Atlantic and made landfall on the north shore of the Gulf of Mexico. From there, some or all of the party made its way up the Mississippi River to the banks of the Ohio. Here, the colonists set down roots and flourished.

In due course, so the story goes, intermarriage between the newcomers and members of the local Indigenous population produced a community of mixed-bloods.

Eventually, hostilities broke out between the immigrant Welsh and the Native peoples of the region, and the former were all but exterminated. The only survivors were the mixed-bloods, who fled westward and up the Missouri to within hailing distance of what is now Manitoba.

This part of the story was proposed in order to explain the existence on the Middle Missouri River of a nation of people commonly referred to as the Mandans (Numakaki in their own language).

The Mandans, well known to European fur traders since early in the 18th century, lived in permanent and substantial villages. These villages were composed of dome-shaped lodges covered with earth. They were typically defended with log palisades and dry moats, and their inhabitants cultivated domesticated plants such as corn, beans, and squash.

Though clearly native to the area and obviously of Aboriginal descent, the Mandans were said to have included individuals with fair hair, light skin colour, and hazel, grey, and blue eyes. These features were regarded by at least one prominent European observer as the legacy of the Mandans' presumed Welsh forebears.

Note that, once again, we have an attempt to reconcile two hitherto unexplained "facts":

- (1) the disappearance of the Medieval Welsh colonists, and
- (2) the occurrence of what were seen as Caucasian-like biological features within an Indigenous North American population.

Although Manitoba never seems to have formed part of the Mandans' core territory, their presence has been inferred by the discovery of Middle Missouri-style pottery remains in our region. Such findings have led to the idea that Mandan trading or bison-hunting expeditions were made into this area in PreContact times.

Later on, Mandan trading parties from the Missouri River villages did business at the Hudson's Bay Company and North West Company posts along the Assiniboine. In addition, the old stories tell of small communities of Mandans living in southern Manitoba before being dispersed by hostile neighbours, absorbed by friendly ones, or decimated by smallpox.

So the Mandans were players, albeit relatively minor ones, in the broad sweep of Manitoba Aboriginal history. Our interest in them here derives from the presence among them of the supposed Caucasian genetic traits, and how early observers thought these traits might have been introduced into an Indigenous population. The implications were that the French-speaking Métis and English-speaking "Half-breeds" that figure so prominently in Manitoba history were not the only — nor necessarily even the first -- peoples of combined Indigenous-European descent to frequent these parts.

At this point, we must ask the question: Can the unusual physical characteristics attributed to the Mandans be explained only in terms of intermarriage between Europeans and Aboriginals? The modern scientific answer to this question is a resounding "no."

The traits in question can be understood as nothing more than random expressions of genetic variability that may occur in any population, and which require no input from external sources.

What is peculiar is the disproportionate amount of attention given to the phenomenon over the years by observers of the Mandans.