

Settlers

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Terms that are becoming ever more prominent in the popular literature are “settler” and “settler society.” It is especially conspicuous in publications generated by Indigenous writers, and it refers specifically to Euro-Canadian/Caucasian/white people (the settlers). The corollary of this application is that Indigenous people were not settlers. I contend that this perception is unwarranted, and the purpose of this paper is to argue against this misapprehension.

Dictionaries minimally define “settler” as one who settles; a person who takes up residence in a new place with the intention of living there on an ongoing basis. A “settlement” is a place where people establish a community, i.e., settle. Often, such people are also thought of as agriculturalists (farmers, gardeners, plant cultivators, livestock-owners, etc.), but this is generally not part of the basic dictionary definitions.

Is it appropriate to describe any group of Indigenous people as “settlers”? I believe it is, and I’ll give you several reasons why I think so, using excerpts mainly from Anishinaabe tradition, Ojibwa historiography, archival research, and the science of archaeology, to illustrate my point.

According to Ojibwa historian Dr Basil Johnston, a large group of Anishinaabe long ago left their homeland in the Michilimackinac area of the Upper Great Lakes in search of the Land of Abundance. They migrated eastward and “settled on the lands of the salt waters.” Note that Dr Johnston uses the term “settled,” which means that the arrivals were settlers. Ojibwa historian William W Warren writes that they became “congregated in a great town,” that is, a settlement. This comment brings to mind the Iroquoian agricultural settlements of the St Lawrence valley and southern Ontario that accommodated hundreds of people at a time (the population of Hochelaga, the Indigenous predecessor of the present Quebec City, was in the order of 3,000 souls when visited by Cartier in 1534).

Later, a large number of these Anishinaabe settlers’ descendants undertook a reverse migration (chibimoodaywin) up the St Lawrence and through the Great Lakes back to the lands of their ancestors. William Warren noted that a group of them congregated at Boweting, i.e., Sault Ste Marie where they “remained for many winters.” In other words, they settled at Boweting and, in so doing, became settlers of the area at that time. Dr Johnston also describes this event, and once again he uses the word “settled” to describe another important piece of Indigenous history. Note that I am quoting Indigenous scholars and historians, not Euro-Canadian or -American academics.

But the chibimoodaywin didn’t end at Boweting. Later still, two more westward migrations took place – one along the north shore, the other along the south shore, of Lake Superior. These movements culminated in the occupation of the island of Moningwunakauning (aka La Pointe,

Wisconsin) toward the western tip of Lake Superior. William Warren calls their place of residence "one grand central town" that "covered a space about three miles long and two broad." There they remained for several generations, variously estimated at between 75 to 120 years. By any measure, this habitation area -- like the earlier "great town" near the East Coast - - can be legitimately called a "settlement" and therefore its occupants -- "settlers" -- at the time they established themselves there.

A more recent phase of the chibimoodaywin directly involved Manitoba. A goodly number of Ojibwas, aka Saulteaux, migrated of their own free will to southern Manitoba as participants in the Fur Trade, and of course many of their descendants live here today. For a time, they did not settle but moved freely about the countryside in fulfillment of their customary annual rounds. But in 1830s, an Anglican missionary established an agricultural settlement just north of Cook's Creek on the Red River to accommodate Chief Peguis' Saulteaux band and numbers of Crees from farther afield. The settlement included a log school, dwellings, and a mill. The church, St Peter's Dynevor, still stands today.

The Fur Trade attracted more than Ojibwas to Manitoba. Alexander Henry the Younger referred in his 1808 journals to a band of Ottawas that had settled at Netley Creek (Dead River) around 1792. Another trader, Peter Fidler, observed that four or five families had built wooden houses at Netley Creek and that several acres of land were planted with maize, potatoes, and "other garden stuff." They passed the summers attending to their crops, and in the fall they separated and moved to their winter quarters to hunt before returning to their little settlement. These Ottawas, then, were seasonal settlers of the Dead River locality.

Other Indigenous people who settled in Manitoba were ancestral members of the Siouan-speaking Hidatsa, whose home territory was along the Missouri River in what is now central North Dakota. They lived in palisaded earth-lodge villages or small towns surrounded by moats, and subsisted mostly by growing corn, beans, and squash, and by bison-hunting. Forebears of the Hidatsas had earlier lived in an earth-lodge village in south-central Manitoba at Star Mound. In the same vicinity were two other such villages, each of which was marked by a well-defined boulder effigy of a turtle, according to historian Orin O. Libby. There can be no doubt that the inhabitants of these places can be called "settlers," at least in the earliest phases of their residence there.

In the 1980s, archaeologists uncovered at Lockport on the Red River the buried remains of an ancient village left behind by Siouan-speaking ("Oneota") (im)migrants from southern Minnesota. The cultural deposits were dated to 1300 CE by the C-14 method, and the people who put them there cultivated domesticated plants, mainly corn and possibly beans. Thus, there were agricultural settlers living along the Red River some 600 years before the arrival Lord Selkirk's colonists.

There are many Métis settlements in Manitoba, and during much of the 19th Century, a sizeable number of Métis people lived in portions of the Red River Settlement. Can not the community members of these places be rightly considered “settlers”? Indeed they can, even though they were partially of Indigenous descent.

If an individual of entirely European ancestry was born and raised in Winnipeg, and has lived here all her life, can she realistically be regarded as a “settler”? I believe the answer is “no” because she didn’t move to the city from somewhere else or abandon a free-ranging, itinerant lifeway in order to do it. But my reading of the current Indigenous literature leaves me with the impression that anyone who isn’t Indigenous is considered to be a settler. I would suggest that someone entirely of European heritage who was born and raised in Winnipeg and is still living in the city is a *descendant* of bona fide European settlers who came here several generations back, but is not herself a “settler.”

There is a personal dimension to this issue. Like the Métis, I am of dual descent – Indigenous and European. My Indigenous forebears were Mi’kmaw whose home territory was in Nova Scotia. In 1963, I moved to Manitoba and in so doing became a settler in this area. But if the term “settler” is to be reserved solely for people of 100% European descent, then it cannot apply to me because of the Indigenous part of my heritage. And yet I fully agree that in 1963 I was, pursuant to the above definitions, a settler in this part of the country.

I therefore conclude that the terminology “settler/settler society” cannot be regarded as a synonym for people of totally European descent, such as were, say, the original Selkirk Settlers or the hypothetical Winnipeg woman described above. To use it only in that sense is inappropriate because it obscures the fact that Indigenous people down through history established settlements and hence were settlers. The expression can and does also refer to present-day people like myself whose cultural and biological ancestry is partially, but not wholly, Indigenous. Restricting the term “settler” to Europeans/Euro-Canadians/Caucasians/white diminishes the visibility of important aspects of Indigenous pre-contact and post-contact history, and reinforces erroneous stereotypes.