

The Takawgamies
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The traditional Native perspective of history holds that Aboriginal peoples have been living in Manitoba "since time immemorial." In archaeological parlance that translates into some 11,000 years (and counting), based on scientific research conducted to date.

People of European descent, by contrast, have known this part of the world for but a fraction of that vast span of time. The first European of record to make an appearance anywhere in what is now Manitoba was the Englishman Sir Thomas Button, who made landfall on the shore of Hudson Bay in 1612 — over 400 years ago. Before that, this entire region was known solely to peoples of Aboriginal heritage.

The Euro-Canadians who eventually settled in southern Manitoba during the late-1800s brought with them a curiosity about Aboriginal history rooted in biblical teachings and a scholarship that originated in the cities back east. Manitoba's early historians — those who lived toward the end of the 19th Century and during the early decades of the 20th — championed intriguing concepts of Manitoba Native history that have long been discounted by more recent thinkers. The pioneering interpretations are highly interesting nonetheless.

One phenomenon that captured the imagination of our early historians was the sizeable number of earthen mounds distributed throughout southern Manitoba. Built by Native peoples, mainly during the Pre-European Contact period as resting places for the deceased, the Manitoba mounds were small-scale versions of larger earthworks found throughout much of what is now the eastern United States.

Manitoba Natives, when asked by the historians about the local mounds, professed little if any knowledge of them. This comes as no surprise, as the local people were Ojibwas whose forebears were themselves relatively recent arrivals in these parts. As such, they had no hand in the construction of the mounds.

Who, then, were the mound-builders?

George Bryce, an early Manitoba historian, subscribed to the theory that the mound-builders were descendants of an Aboriginal Mexican nation known as the Toltecs. When the Aztecs, the Mexican Indigenes encountered by the Spaniards in Historic times, swept into the Valley of Mexico around the 12th Century CE, they encountered and conquered the resident Toltecs, a "civilized race, well acquainted with the arts and science," especially in the areas of artistic expression and astronomy, said Bryce.

The Toltecs, Bryce believed, originally came from either Peru or New Mexico. They were an aggressive people who sent colonies abroad during the 7th Century CE, not only into Mexico, but also to the Mississippi River valley via the Rio Grande.

Many of the huge mounds found in the southeastern United States were thought by Bryce and others to mark the course of this Toltecan migration through that part of the continent (Figure 1). One branch moved up the Ohio River to the Great Lakes and onwards toward the St. Lawrence. Another group, of more relevance to Manitoba history, proceeded up the Mississippi to its headwaters and beyond to the Rainy River, where they arrived sometime during the 11th Century CE. Here they prospered, cultivating the soil and building large mounds (the Manitou Mounds) that survive to this very day as monuments to their industriousness and civilization. In short order, colonists from these communities took up residence in southern Manitoba.

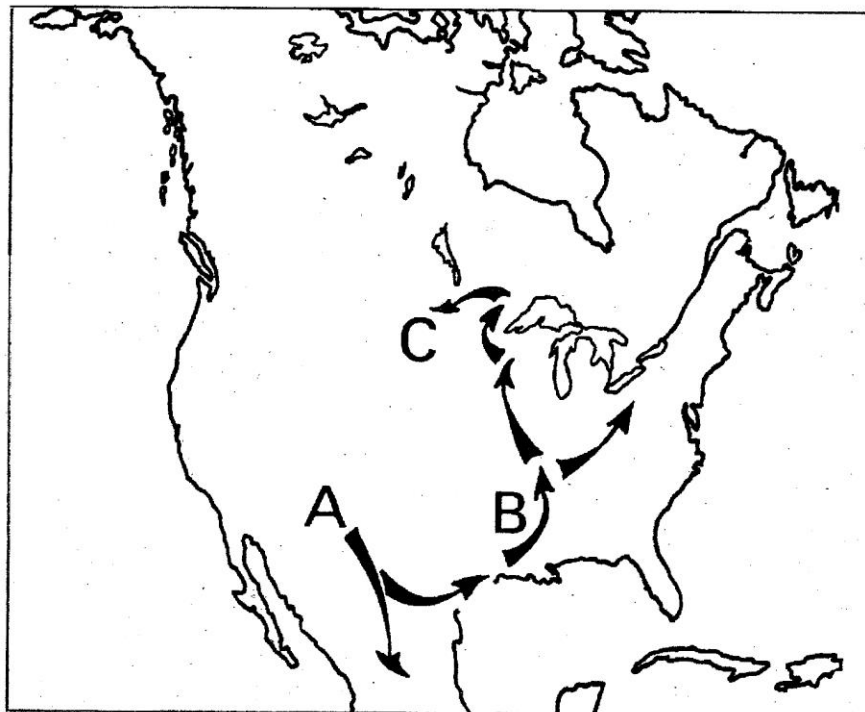


Figure 1: Migration of the Toltecs (A, B) and Takawgamies (C).

Bryce termed these northernmost Toltecan descendants the "Takawgamies." In their new settings, they became less warlike thanks to their preoccupation with more peaceful diversions. In the process, they also became less capable of defending themselves.

This brings us back to the Aztecs, also a people well versed in the arts of war, who had their own expansionist agenda. Not only did they conquer the Toltecs in Mexico itself; a wave of them surged up the Mississippi Valley as had the Toltecs several centuries previous, routing the

local populations as they went. Having captured and settled one area, they would dispatch offshoot groups to carry the process forward. Ultimately, the northernmost Toltec descendants, the rather docile Takawgamies, were overcome by the invaders.

Bryce felt that the Sioux (Dakota in their own language) are a descendant nation of these northern Aztecs, and it was they (the Dakotas) who vanquished the Takawgamies.

Here, then, we have Bryce's explanation for two things: (1) the initial arrival of the Dakotas in the Manitoba region, and (2) the disappearance of the northernmost Takawgamie mound-builders from Manitoba and adjacent Ontario.

Thus, from the 12th Century CE, when the ancestral Aztecs began their expansion out of the deserts north of Mexico, to when the far-distant Takawgamies were finally laid low, two or three centuries would have elapsed.

By the time the French began to arrive in southern Manitoba in the early 1700s, the mound-building tradition had all but passed away. This conclusion is supported by Cree tradition, which claims that for the three or four centuries before the arrival of Europeans, they (the Cree) were the sole possessors of the country around Lake Superior, Lake of the Woods and Lake Winnipeg.

In sum, it was Bryce's theory that the mound-building Takawgamies of Toltec heritage occupied the Rainy and Red rivers from the 11th to the 15th centuries CE.

How does Bryce's thinking, now dating back a full century, compare with that of modern-day experts?

For one thing, current archaeologists do not attribute the Manitoba mounds to descendants of the Toltecs. In fact, they do not equate them with the forebears of any known Aboriginal nation in particular, although there seems to be general agreement that a good many of the mounds were built by people who spoke a Siouan language. This is at odds with Bryce's concept, which has Siouans (Dakotas) destroying the mound-builder population, rather than being members of it.

Furthermore, Bryce's notion that the Dakotas trace their ancestry to the Aztecs has long been discounted by scholars; his suggestion that Aztecs ascended the Mississippi River is also without foundation, and his term "Takawgamies," with its historical connection to the Toltecs, essentially died with him, at least among local scholars.

On the other hand, Bryce showed himself to be something of a visionary in his belief that his Takawgamies were agriculturalists (gardeners). In the mid-1980s, archaeologists discovered remnants of PreContact agriculture on the Red River at Lockport, and there is growing evidence for it in southwestern Manitoba as well.

None of these recent findings, nor the archaeologists' conclusions about them, would have surprised Bryce. In fact, Bryce showed a good deal of insight in assigning Mexican roots to the Aboriginal agriculture that came to be practiced in southern Manitoba. It has long been recognized by archaeologists that the Indigenous "Mississippian" civilization of the southeastern United States drew considerable content and inspiration from Mexico, although neither the Toltecs nor the Aztecs as such are nowadays recognized as the actual contributors. Furthermore, the Manitoba gardeners came up from the south, as did the forebears of Bryce's latter-day Takawgamies (albeit via Rainy River and Lake of the Woods). Most surprising of all, Bryce had placed his gardening and mound-building Takawgamies as occupying southern Manitoba between the 11th and 15th centuries CE, roughly the same time period assigned to Manitoba's Aboriginal gardeners by our late-20th and early 21st-Century archaeologists.

There is one point made by Bryce that deserves special comment: his idea that the Takawgamies were conquered by Dakotas in PreContact times. In order for the Dakotas to perpetrate something like this in southern Manitoba, they would obviously have had to be here to do it. Once this had been accomplished, Dakota people could have included parts of southern Manitoba within their general territory.

And in fact, Dakota tradition maintains that southern Manitoba was indeed part of their ancestral lands, even though the idea is not shared by most historians, who take the view that this region did not witness a significant presence of Dakotas before the influx following the Minnesota Uprising of 1862.

Other Native accounts relate how a confederacy of Crees, Ojibwas, and Assiniboins clashed with and decimated a regional population of Dakotas (Sissetons) at four locations in the Manitoba Interlake in early Historic times. Again, they obviously could not have done so if the Dakotas were not already up here in the first place.

Hence, Bryce may have been right about an early Dakota presence in Manitoba, but for all the wrong reasons.

Finally, the "Takawgamie" mounds on the Rainy River are expressions of the Laurel and Blackduck complexes which are generally considered nowadays to belong to the Western Woodland *Algonquian* configuration, rather than to offshoots of Mexican civilization.

All of the players in Bryce's account were Indigenous, and all of the events recounted above, had they proven valid, would have taken place in PreContact times. This of course means that no Europeans would have been involved.
