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THEIR CROWDED HOUR: the Micmac Cycle

IN OCTOBER, 1955, Mr. K. B. Hopps, when digging a drain near his house between Pictou and Caribou, was surprised to uncover at a depth of three feet a large intact copper kettle. Under it lay a human skull, a few bones, an iron axe, and some inches of a wooden bow, and beyond were other kettles of brass and copper, iron axes and knives, swords and spearpoints, the paraphernalia of a remarkable Micmac burial.

It is most fortunate that Mr. Hopps realized something of the importance of his find and excavated it carefully, but we may be able to evaluate it better if we see it against the background of the culture from which it sprang. Our knowledge of the early Micmacs derives in part from their own legends, in part from travellers' tales, in part from the scanty archaeological work that has been done in Nova Scotia, and in part from rather insecurely based deductions from the patterns of life in other areas. Let us look at an early site and an early burial, actualities from a time centuries before the Pictou interment.

North of the estuary of Bear River the Indians found a beach of coarse sand in an incurve of the shoreline where the high cape, with Bear Island beyond, shielded it against waves from the Annapolis Basin, making it a good landing-place for canoes. Equally important, there was fresh water, a spring on the hillside and another just below the high-tide mark. The slope was steep for a camp but was of well-drained glacial gravel, easy to dig. At low tide the beach would yield clams and the slate outcrops mussels, and at lowest tide between the reefs would show beds of blue clay, excellent for making pots. Seals would have hauled out on the island shores, and the quiet estuary would have given easy access to many miles of hardwood hunting-land thronged with white-tailed deer. Many centuries ago a family of Indians recognized the advantages of the site and dug a level platform on the hillside and pitched their wigwam there.

They must have stayed long or have returned repeatedly, for in the tiny fire of a single wigwam they burned between fifty and one hundred cords of hardwood, picked up by hand stick by stick. A mound of fourteen inches of ash built up in their first hearth without any intervening

layers of leaf-mould is more probably a sign that they camped here every fall than that they camped here permanently. Neither game supplies nor their lack of sanitation nor the nature of the people themselves would have allowed them to remain more than a season in one place. But after that the shifting hearth-sites and discontinuous deposits suggest periods of years during which the camp was deserted. One of the children died and was buried ten yards to the east. A second wigwam was raised on this spot, probably after the grave had been forgotten, and the refuse of ash and leaf-mould and shell built up a stratified deposit of thirty inches over the burial place. The people seem to have become more regular in their movements by now, for we find orderly strata—an inch or two of gray ash, an inch of leaf-mould, an inch or two of mixed ash and shell and leaf-mould. The ash represents the period of occupation, the leaf-mould the period of lying empty, the mixture the process of re-levelling the central mound of ash and the outside ring of shell before pitching the wigwam again. How long an interval is represented by an inch of leaf-mould? The leaf-fall of the virgin forest of those days cannot be judged by comparison with the second-growth of today, but in fifty years since the last occupation of the site never more than two inches of mould have accumulated, and in many places the mussel-shells and nails of the last century are on the surface. Generations must have passed before the second wigwam was built; another generation may have passed before the third shallower wigwam site was added to the camp; yet from beginning to end there was no change of culture. Time stood very still in those days.

Probably this first wigwam was of birchbark, though no trace of wood or bark has come down to us. At least it conformed in size, shape, and organization to the wigwams which the Micmacs still erect when they gather for the feast of St. Anne. The platform, levelled from the steep hillside, was about six yards across at first, although later a talus of rubbish widened the area. The door faced south, as it should, and the women sat to the left of the central fire, the men to the right, in the best Micmac tradition. The first hearth was surrounded by a bank of the yellow sand of the floor, though later hearths were framed with stones. No doubt the floor was deep in fir-boughs, but there was more covering than that, for the clamshells from a winter's meal were carried out and thrown down the tip or up the hillside, and these were mixed with potsherds and stone-chips and even a bear's-tooth pendant, as though the rubbish on a rug had deepened beyond bearing. One thinks of the moosehide rugs mentioned by LeClercq centuries later.

The father of the family repaired his spears and dropped the broken points on his side among the boughs. Occasionally he chipped stone indoors, but not often. Perhaps he was too busy with the hunting; perhaps his hands were too cold—for this camp was occupied chiefly in winter. You may object: But Lescarbot said that the Indians went inland in the winter. This camp, however, existed centuries before Lescarbot, and, in any case, the winter migration was never true of all Micmacs. Many bands went inland, but others spent the summer inland and the winter on the shore, if such movements better suited the food-supply. In this camp there are the skulls of many white-tailed deer, split to extract the brains, and many of these skulls carry antlers or the fresh burr from which the horns have just fallen. That dates their killing to winter. At times the Indians camped here in summer also, for there are backbones of fish of the cod family which move offshore in the autumn. In recent times, at least, the Indians did not eat shellfish during the summer, but even without this evidence the bones suggest that winter occupation was longest or most frequent.

The women of the wigwam must have been very busy. They had to butcher and cook the meat, to make pots and baskets, to spin and weave, and to fashion the clothing. And for all these activities they seem to have had the scantiest equipment. The narrow platform held the wigwam rigidly to the same spot throughout its lifetime, and on the women's side there are no signs of flint-working. Occasionally a broken knife may be found there, but much more often there are crude scrapers and choppers and sinew-smoothers, eoliths that in a less definite context one would not have recognized as implements at all. The flat stones, so common on this side, were probably plates or roasting pans. The long rounded whetstones of slate, so frequent in other sites, are here shown to be women's tools, but whether they are flensing stones for cleaning or softening hides or paddles for potting, one cannot now say. Lumps of potting clay may be found among the ash, and the potsherds are of local clay glistening with mica. Rarely they are tempered with crushed shell, more often with hillside sand, and the larger pots are so coarsely tempered that they crumble at a touch. Yet these and the finest alike are usually decorated with the imprint of some coarse fabric pressed against the damp clay, either fine grass basketry or moosehair cloth twelve strands to the inch. Throughout the life of the site this pattern remained the most common, which suggests that the potters were all women of the same family and that they were matrilocal, the bridegroom moving to his wife's wigwam. Sometimes a basket was used to make the impression, and this has left a fine sharp-edged pattern as of a fabric of split twigs, quite unlike the splint

baskets of the modern Micmac. Did they use beaver-teeth for such work? Broken beaver-teeth are commoner on the men's side. Women's tools seem to be chiefly the discarded fragments from the men's chipping floors.

Clamshells are conspicuous, but in the actual hearths shells are rare and bones common. This was a careless family, for they allowed dogs to chew the long bones, heedless of the danger of insulting the game. Probably meat constituted the bulk of the food, while shellfish were a reserve for hungry occasions, though these must have been many. The common long clam far outnumbered all others; whelks were a second favourite, and then purple mussels; surf-clams and oysters must have been rare luxuries. White-tailed deer were more important as a food than moose, while caribou may not have been there at all. Beaver was a staple, seal and porcupine and woodchuck fairly common, otter and dog mere titbits. But the dogs were strange, varying in size from medium to one huge husky bigger than a wolf.

At one time a child of the first wigwam had died, probably in the spring and far away. She—I think it was she—was folded up in her beaver cloak and sewn into a birchbark bundle and was hung in a tree away from wild beasts. With the autumn she was brought home and buried in a small grave edged on one side with stones and heaped over with some six inches of sand. This grave was only some ten yards from the wigwam, where it could easily be visited. There was no elaborate tomb, no conspicuous lining, no gifts for the dead. Beside the crushed ribs was a long curved "awl" of bone which probably had been the fastener of her cloak. It was grooved below its head for a suspending string and had been worn smooth at the middle as though by a leather loop. The child's neck-vertebrae were in place beside the crushed skull with its powerful chinless jaw and massive teeth, but the long bones seemed displaced, and tiny land-snails, such as might have penetrated even stitched birchbark, had died in the hollows of the bones. . . .

Probably several centuries separate this primitive semi-nomadic household and this simple yet affectionate burial from the spectacular tomb at Pictou. The Micmac had still a long way to come, if, indeed, you can call these people "Micmac." In some respects they seem to have approached the Archaic "Red-Paint" people who left their ground slate tools along the South Shore. At Bear River the lack of corner-notched stone arrowheads, the crude chippings and square or sloped shoulders of the spearheads, the large dogs, suggest the pre-Algonkian tribes, but the pottery is definitely Algonkian, and there are many flat points of bone that may be arrowheads. No site quite like this has been found in Nova Scotia, but, indeed, no Nova Scotian site is quite like any other. It seems

that these small groups came here pressed forward by the expansion of agricultural tribes in northern and southern New York State, a movement which began less than two thousand years ago. These Algonkian nomads did not move as tribes, for they had little or no organization. Family by family, from many areas and stocks, they shouldered each other along in their search for empty hunting-grounds, and here they found only a sparse primitive people, without bows or pottery or habits of war. So here they settled and set out to learn the possibilities of the land. Was this the reason why in this camp, within sight of the North Mountain with its veins of jasper and chalcedony, they chipped their tools chiefly out of quartzite and slate? With time they learned where to find good stone and which rivers had great runs of salmon and smelt, of gaspereaux and eels, and at these they foregathered with other family groups, and in time their young people intermarried, and the dialects and cultures drew closer together. North of Fundy one population was merging into the Malecites, south they were becoming Micmac, though the names had not yet appeared. Finer flint-working became usual and a greater dependence upon the bow. Then one day, as an Indian told Dr. Raddall, a watchman in a pinetree on a hill above Milton on the Liverpool River called down to his friends that he saw a great canoe with white wings. . . .

There is a wide gap in our archaeological record for this critical period of the sixteenth century. We have excavated or sampled dozens of campsites, but not one has yielded European goods in an Indian context. Always the small camps come to an end still purely Indian and are not used again until the British period. Probably the people had gathered into larger and more defensible groups under pressure of war. Micmac legends tell of the unfailing superiority of Micmac over Mohawk, but fear of the Mohawk haunts their folklore, and "Kwedech" graves are pointed out far into the country. To the embattled Micmac the European fishermen came as a gift from the gods. With them skins could be exchanged for iron arrowheads and spearpoints, for knives and axes, for food against the winter, and for provisions to make possible an attack upon the enemy. Jacques Cartier found agricultural Iroquois upon the whole St. Lawrence; seventy years later they were gone and the Algonkian nomads had triumphed. The Micmacs had taken to trade and were carrying goods westward. By the time of Champlain and Lescarbot flint-working had been abandoned, potting had been forgotten, and the Micmac had become dependent upon foreign tools and food. And then, around 1640, comes the Pictou burial. . . .

Burials are not in all ways as satisfactory as campsites. In a grave there is a chance of finding unbroken pots (of which not one is as yet

known from Nova Scotia), the finest implements, the bones of the dead (if our acid soils have not devoured them), and occasionally the food for the dead man's journey or the remains of a funeral feast. But at best this is pomp and circumstance, an attempt to impress death with the wealth that life can offer. The camp-site gives the day by day routine, the hearth with its broken pots, the bones and shells of the meals, lumps of clay from the potting, the fine pressure flakes where a man touched up his tools on a rainy day, the red ochre dropped in the ashes when the woman stained the parting of her hair. The bones in the midden and the fruit-trees around the camp—shadbush, choke-cherry and hawthorn—tell of the seasons of occupation. So it is possible to piece together something of their life, although their chief equipment of wood and birchbark and leather has vanished utterly. It is the daily life of which the Pictou burial tells us very little, so we must fill in the gaps as well as we can from the writings of the time.

The season is autumn, and the leaves of the hardwood forests have been turning. (That store of hazelnuts would not have been there at any other season.) A son of the chief had died last winter far inland, and his family had trussed the body in a birchbark roll and had hung it in a tree until permanent burial near the main camp should again be possible. (The skull is of a man approaching thirty years, whose status could scarcely warrant the lavishness of the gifts.) With the spring freshet the family had descended the river but had not brought the body. The hungry season was not suited to sending a man properly equipped to the Happy Hunting Ground. First the winter's furs must be traded to the French, moosehides to be made into fine leather, pelts of otter and mink and fox, and especially the cast-off beaver robes of winter. The long hair of these had been worn away and the woolly undercoat had become matted and greasy from contact with the Indian's bear's-fat underclothing, and the result was now the valuable *castor gras* beloved of hatters. Now the trading had been done, the delightful endless chaffering and boasts and threats and lies that went to a satisfying bargain. A younger son had been sent to the winter camp to bring back the body. The grave had been dug on the shore opposite to the Pictou Landing camp at a point where a sandy island made a sheltered beach for canoes. Now all the adult males of the village had gathered to do honour to their dead and to their chief, vaunting their new and purposeless wealth, yet secretive from the fear which haunts warriors. There were perhaps forty of them, burly men with brown skins and black hair, most of them with big-boned faces and large broad noses. They were simply dressed, each with a triangle of soft skin and many wearing also new cloaks of beaver which left the right arm

bare. Every man had an iron knife slung on a pouch around his neck, and each held an iron-headed spear or a bow and a quiverful of iron-tipped arrows. Their straight hair, heavy with grease, was held back from the face by a band around the head and fell to the shoulders behind.

The grave was ready, lined out with birchbark and five layers of beaver pelts, the last layer meat-side up and stained with red ochre, the colour of the blood which is life. The chief, wearing his feathered cap and decorated cloak of office, stepped down into the grave and received into his arms the birchbark bundle which contained the remains of his son. It was very light, and fresh bark covered one end where some animal had forced a way through to the body. He laid the body on the beaver pelts and placed beside it a bow and an iron axe. His younger son passed down to him a great copper kettle, and he laid this inverted over the remains. Now there were other gifts from the family—French blankets and rushmats for the dead man's comfort, a brass kettle full of hazelnuts for his food, another kettle with meat, iron swords and spears to speed his hunting. The other men brought up their gifts, each sacrificing the thing he valued most, a tribute to the dead and a boast of the living. Here were iron spearheads and knives, swordblades for use as moose-spears, a French mug of red pottery glazed inside with green, Mohawk scalps, clumsy iron axes, a short sword with a brass handle, kettles and more kettles. Clearly so much could not be fitted into the grave, so they set to and dug an extension. Into this the gifts were cast almost at random, and the givers of kettles hacked them into pieces with axes or trampled the life out of them that they might the sooner join the dead man in the land of shades. The grave was covered over and the mourners returned to their canoes. Last of all came the chief. There was pride in his heart that his son had been buried so worthily, but there came also disturbing flashes of memory, of a small naked brown boy with arrow on bowstring as he stalked a squirrel, and of a birchbark bundle torn open at the end. . . .

There was wealth in that grave. Denys speaks of six thousand *livres* of furs in a single burial, a waste against which the French traders protested in vain. It was reasonable enough for a Frenchman to look forward to a carven tomb in his village church, but for a savage to squander on a burial furs from which a Frenchman might make a profit was quite senseless. The arguments, however, carried little weight with the Indians, who were well aware that they had the last word in their own country. The French, too, knew this and resented it. Denys is particularly spiteful in his references to the savages. They are a worthless people, always wanting great prices for the worn-out clothing which otherwise they would cast away. When they find a fisherman alone, they camp around him

and eat up all his catch, though the arrival of a ship may intimidate them into leaving him in peace. They are so dishonest, men and women alike, that they can best in a bargain even the French fishermen. They have no regard for law but trade with any unlicensed visitor without considering that the French king has sold the monopoly of the Indian trade to one man. This illegal traffic, chiefly in spirits, is debauching both men and women to such an extent that the Jesuits are abandoning their mission, since any good that they may do is promptly undone by the free traders.

This was the merchant's point of view, but to the Indians life was rich as never before. In all that Pictou burial there was nothing durable that was not French. In a century the Indians had stepped from a culture of subsistence-hunting into the specialized pursuit of beaver. As a Micmac said to Father LeClercq, "In truth, my brother, the beaver does everything to perfection. He makes for us kettles, axes, swords, knives, and gives us drink and food without the trouble of cultivating the ground." No wonder that this sense of mastery culminated in the wasteful profusion of the Pictou grave. For, to the Micmac, the supply of beaver was inexhaustible as long as he treated them with respect and did not burn their bones or throw them into a river or feed them to the dogs.

Among the Indians I have met many whose intelligence seemed to me to be far above average; yet, when their conventions were involved, they used their intelligence no more than we do ours. A Micmac of the old school knows the life-history of the moose as we know that of the cow; he knows that in his youth the law did not allow the hunting of moose after March, so that they might "have time to have kittens"; but he knows also that this has nothing to do with the abundance of moose. A respected chief told me why there were no longer any moose in Cape Breton. Moose had been very abundant, and some Micmacs had been hunting them near Cape North and drying the meat which "was bread for the Indians." One evening a fight broke out among the men, and they belaboured each other with moose-hams. In the morning they went hunting again. They found the tracks of many moose converging into one trail that led across Cape North and could be followed thirty yards into the sea where the moose had launched themselves for their swim to Newfoundland and away from the island where they had been insulted. Today you cannot keep a moose alive in Cape Breton. . . . This explanation satisfied him. Old men in Dingwall remember when that port used to export yearly three or four schoonerloads of moosehides, but that, of course, has nothing to do with the disappearance of moose. Reality brought the Indians down to earth with a sad bump, but many have not yet awakened.

The triumph of the Algonkian tribes over the Iroquois was short-lived. To defend themselves the Iroquois organized for war, and later the Dutch provided them with muskets. The French did the same with their Indians, but they could not trade them organization. Again the fear of the Mohawks returned to haunt the Micmacs until they saw spies in the squirrels of the woods. During this time the French missionaries were labouring to christianize and civilize the Micmac. They gave them a new writing built around the old pictographs, they tried to teach them to farm, and they sought to check their incessant wandering. The convents trained girls in housekeeping and embroidery. The French armies used the Indians in their wars against the English, and it is probably from this period that the names "Micmac" and "Malecite" arose among tribes who had never before felt the need for a name. One can imagine a Frenchman who had noticed that these groups of Indians did not mix, asking a Micmac: "What do you call these people?" "Nigumakh (my friends, my own people)." "And those?" "Maleesit (they do not talk properly)." The Micmacs still retain the tradition that the two tribes had once been the same people, but that separation and the merging of different groups of dialects had made them mutually unintelligible.

With the conquest of Acadia by the British, the Micmacs found war at home for the first time in centuries. They were a thorn in the British side until Gorham's Rangers brought the dreaded Mohawks into Nova Scotia. Then they capitulated. The beaver were gone, the French were gone, the missions were gone. Aimlessly, without leadership or guidance, the Micmacs returned to the remnants of their old culture, and their camps appear again along the paths of annual migration from which they had been absent for centuries. There were no more spiritual guides to hold them to the laborious monotony of farming, and the many "Indian Gardens" shrank to seasonal camps. There was no more fear of the Mohawks to hold the families in large bands, the *mesteeḱ oudun* of Rand's legends, and they reverted to small groups of from one to four families, as it had been in the early days.

The nineteenth-century camp-sites are there to be investigated, but they are pathetic rather than interesting. Often the Indians used old sites, stripping off the leaf-mould and re-levelling the surface until smashed cheap chinaware mingled with incised potsherds and clay pipes with arrowheads. In food there was little difference, except that white-tailed deer, great auk, and southern oyster had become extinct. Clam and mussel shells were the same in both, and moose-bones were split for their marrow, but now moose-heads were usually brought to the camp to be eaten, which in the old days had been done only in hungry winters.

There were arrowheads still, but they were of fire-hardened wood, a boy's weapon, and on the women's side of the wigwam battered brass thimbles and broken embroidery scissors, a sad memory of the convent culture, became rare and disappeared. Porpoise bones turn up for the first time at Bear River, which was within range of the great porpoise ground of Digby Gut, and their vertebrae were carved into dice for the new gambling game of *waltes*. Wrought-iron nails and shipbuilder's spikes gave way to wire and tarpaper as the wigwam degenerated; and at last the camps faded into the broken glass and pop-bottle caps of the atomic age. The Indians had abandoned the woods.

The arrogance of the seventeenth-century Micmac towards the scattered French is now reversed and too often one hears: "The Indians used to camp here but we burned them out." Their camping grounds, even when still legally their property, have been occupied by neighbouring farmers who would consider themselves ill-treated if the Indians were to return. The game which was their bread is slaughtered for sport or is protected by laws which they cannot appreciate. A few stragglers still wander in search of wood for baskets and axe-handles, others follow the crops as migratory workers. The majority are penned on reserves where they have the security of poverty. No doubt this is not the whole story. There is more white blood than Indian in the reservations; probably there is more Indian blood outside the reserves than inside them, though this sooner becomes indistinguishably merged with the white. The Micmac is faced with the unenviable choice of going out into the white man's world where he may find a future but must lose his past, or of remaining in the reserve where he may keep his past but will have no future. Could we not have spared a little dignity to their sunset? Must every people enjoy only one crowded hour of glorious life and then end not with a bang but a whimper?