

Exporting the White Saviour: The Colonial Textual Influence on Canadian/Indigenous relationships

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As a colony, Canada was formed and founded in the imperial image. As such, the empirical ideology of control exerted a considerable amount of influence on Canada's political relationship with local Indigenous people.¹ Even texts created and imported into Canada had a direct impact on belief systems and attitudes towards Indigenous peoples. Everything from newspapers to policy contained traces of imperial influence. Perhaps the greatest evidence of this can be found within the white saviour trope, a textual trope that emerged as an expression of privilege alongside depictions of supposed Indigenous inferiority and savagery, but without expressions of guilt. During the colonial era, this trope acted to reaffirm government patriarchy through key texts. Through an examination of works by 19th century journalists and writers Rudyard Kipling and Henry Morton Stanley, this paper will explore how the British ideology of control manifested as the white saviour trope, and later appeared in the Canadian context through poet, writer, and bureaucrat Duncan Campbell Scott and his colleague journalist and politician Nicolas Flood Davin.

My Master of Arts thesis was dedicated to examining how the white saviour trope is expressed in current Canadian newspaper coverage of Grassy Narrows and the mercury contamination in the nearby Wabigoon-English River system. It was determined that the trope is indeed present and that it is used unconsciously by Canadian journalists. This suggests the trope's deeply embedded nature. From that work, a useful definition was formed that outlines how the trope evolved and currently operates:

The white saviour trope [...] is a normative practice that manifests as part of an ideological discourse that can be traced to the British Imperial era when Indigenous peoples were depicted in literature, correspondence, and newspapers as savage and helpless. The trope is a modern discourse that circulates within registers of privilege, guilt, inferiority, and savagery in the coverage of Indigenous people. It is a form of "the common sense" that is focused on the self-interest of the dominant society by creating the illusion of correcting a widely publicized issue, and permits people to feel

¹ Indigenous used in this context is an all-encompassing term that refers to First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people. This usage is in keeping with the current Canadian socio-political climate.

good (charitable) while simultaneously problematizing specific Indigenous issues, politicizing those issues, and effectively silencing Indigenous people. And when manifested over a long period of time, the trope prevents the core concerns and issues of Indigenous people and communities to come to light, and acts in the maintenance of an unequal power balance.²

This rather long and complex definition was first inspired by American sociologist Matthew W. Hughey, who states that, when depicted in film, the white saviour is “...the genre in which a white messianic character saves a lower- or working-class, usually urban or isolated, non-white character from a sad fate.”³ The embedded attitudes that inform such behaviour are symptomatic of the privilege afforded to a specific race and speak loudly of issues of power. However, there is also a sense of guilt hidden within such behaviour, a need to “raise” a person of colour above the poverty and suffering now associated with the fall-out of colonization. This is where the trope operates, in texts, films, and, arguably, actions that are derived from this deep sense of guilt. However, a trope does not simply manifest from nowhere. As my research suggests, the trope grew largely from the imperialistic endeavours of colonization.

In fact, the white saviour trope is deeply associated with the remnants of a historical writing phenomenon: the imperial archive. According to literary scholar Thomas Richards, the imperial archive is “less a specific institution than an entire epistemological complex for representing a comprehensive knowledge within the domain of Empire.”⁴ This comprehensive collection of knowledge, data, poetry, and prose effectively became a breeding ground for the white saviour trope as it secured imperialistic ideals within texts.

For instance, this concept of the imperial archive, and the manifestation of the white saviour trope within, is clearly illustrated in Rudyard Kipling’s poem “The White Man’s Burden: The United States & The Philippine Islands, 1899.” The poem was originally intended for the US government as a call to take up the cause of imperialism in the same way that that the British had done. While the poem primarily calls on the US to dominate the inhabitants of their newly acquired possessions in Puerto Rico, Guam, Cuba, and the Philippines, seemingly with connotations of manifest destiny, the first stanza in Kipling’s poem also reveals the imperial attitude towards Indigenous peoples of other lands:

² Samantha Stevens, “Towards Reconciliation: The White Saviour Trope in Canadian Newspaper coverage of Grassy Narrows First Nation between 1977 to 2019” (Unpublished master’s thesis, Concordia University, last modified December 6, 2019), 106; In this case registers are used as per Dr. James S. McLean’s explanation: “[...] registers may be used to frame an issue within certain thematic categories that resonate broadly with the value commitments of multiple publics.” See James S. McLean, *Inside the NDP War Room: Competing for Credibility in a Federal Election*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012), 143.

³ Matthew W. Hughey, “The Saviour Trope and the Modern Meanings of Whiteness,” in *The White Saviour Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 1.

⁴ Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*, (London: Verso, 1993), 14.

Take up the White Man's burden—
 Send forth the best ye breed—
 Go send your sons to exile
 To serve your captives' need
 To wait in heavy harness
 On fluttered folk and wild—
 Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
 Half devil and half child

This excerpt points to the designation of non-whites and Indigenous peoples to a status below that of the colonizers of British and European descent. Kipling refers to non-European peoples as “new-caught, sullen peoples,”⁶ which carries connotations of people as property rather than as equals. Also referring to them as “half devil and half child”⁷ points to the imperial sense of salvation, of saving these people from their devilry and their childish innocence. It is this act of saving Kipling refers to as “the White Man's burden.”

Concerning the white saviour trope, contained within the imperial era poem there are expressions of privilege, and depictions of inferiority and savagery, but there are no hints of guilt. This suggests that guilt is a modern expression associated with the white saviour trope, and was not inline with the ideas associated with the imperial civilizing mission. Where these expressions of guilt came from and when they emerged exactly will not be covered in this paper. However, it is the perseverance of privilege, inferiority, and savagery that is somewhat alarming. This perseverance may have something to do with affirmation within the colonial texts.

After all, literary scholar David Spurr writes that Kipling's “poem serves as a model of the rhetoric of affirmation in its techniques of self-idealization and repetition.”⁸ Affirmation is important because management of a vast empire that spans the globe “must always reaffirm its value in the face of an engulfing nothingness.”⁹ At the height of the British empire such affirmation was best achieved through control of information. A constant reaffirmation of Indigenous peoples' supposed state of incivility acted to secure ideas of British superiority at the centre, which was then distributed to the colonies. After all, what better way to reach the colonies *en masse* than through something that was destined to be preserved: key texts written by influential white men whose conviction rested firmly within the tenets of colonialism.

This assurance of preservation made sense in the continuity of the empire's control. After all, seeking to maintain control through militaristic means would have been logistically unmanageable over a long period of time. That was a mistake made by many

⁵ Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man's Burden: The United States & The Philippine Islands, 1899,” *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition*, (New York: Doubleday, 1929).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 113.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

previous empires which sought large scale domination (including the Spanish Empire from which America acquired its new possessions).

To fully understand the ideological mindset of committed imperialists such as Kipling, who worked as a journalist in addition to writing poetry and prose, it is useful to mobilize a concept from John Hartley's work on journalism and modernity and its relationship to the imperial archive.¹⁰ Hartley argues that journalism is a specific social and historical textual system that acts as the "sense-making" engine of modernity, and only develops where "literacy, affluence, and social differentiation are highest."¹¹

With respect to the British empire, Hartley states that such sense-making was used to promote dominance through the control of information. But in order to have information to control, a vast archive of data had first to be compiled. Thus, everything from information about coffee production in Kenya, to the signing of land treaties on the Canadian Prairies, to assessments of tensions between Muslims and Hindus on the Indian subcontinent was compiled, analyzed, and circulated. This mass collection of information formed the statistical and ideological basis for a justification of dominance, and the imposition of a rules-based colonist culture based largely on what Hartley referred to as "a fantasy of control through knowledge."¹²

This "fantasy of control" has been noted by other researchers. Canadian political economist Harold Innis noted that "writing as a means of communication provides a system of administration of territory for the conquerors [...]."¹³ American sociologist James W. Carey also reminds us that even the first tasks of writing and printing were concerned with the matters and "the administration of nation and empire."¹⁴ The ability to print and distribute around the globe, thanks to the Industrial Revolution and the "rapid expansion of the printing industry," only hastened the spread of information across the empire and aided in extending its reach.¹⁵

That said, the roots of the white saviour trope, and its expression in popular literature, were not just confined to the "high" imperial works of Kipling and his ilk. The famous exploits of the Welsh journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley, in documenting the expedition to rescue Dr. David Livingstone from the perils of darkest Africa, can be interpreted as also representing a manifestation of the trope. After all his epic adventure tells the tale of one where a white man who is sent to discover the fate of another white man who is lost among the *savages*.

¹⁰ Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*, (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 1-8, quoted in John Hartley, "Journalism and Modernity," *Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity, Popular Culture*, (London: Oxford University Press Inc., 1996), 43.

¹¹ Hartley, "Journalism and Modernity," 33.

¹² *Ibid*, 44.

¹³ Harold Innis, *The Bias of Communication*, (New York: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 75.

¹⁴ James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 121.

¹⁵ Innis, *The Bias of Communication*, 139.

As a journalist, Stanley reported on his adventures in “a reportorial style,”¹⁶ a relatively new style of newspaper writing that was more welcomed in the US than it was in Britain when Stanley embarked on his voyage in 1871. One reason for this difference could be because at this particular time in Britain “the interest in literature which paralleled suppression of newspapers checked the growth of literature in the colonies and compelled an emphasis on newspapers.”¹⁷ It was also around this time that “[i]n the colonies books were imported on a large scale from England and Europe by booksellers and the colonial printer turned his attention to newspapers.”¹⁸

Still, Stanley fed his stories back to the US and to Britain simultaneously. His reports emphasized “dangerous, suspenseful adventures, violent battles with ‘savage’ peoples, and the awe and mystery of uncharted, exotic terrain.”¹⁹ Despite the fact that these accounts were less welcomed in Britain, England’s *Daily Telegraph* saw the benefit of Stanley’s work: “The native tribes will be brought in contact with modern civilization, and it will not be long before that vast and well watered tableland will be reached by the enterprise and commerce of the white man.”²⁰

Stanley’s reportage and the reactionary statement from the centre exemplifies the colonial attitudes of the time. He was adamant about only referring to the Indigenous people of the region as savages. Moreover, there is a sense of privilege and entitlement involved in “the non-Western world in terms [...] of the promise for westernized development [...]”²¹ Though Stanley’s work and adventures predated Kipling’s poem, and the fact that these men were essentially a world apart, it is no coincidence that they shared similar sentiments towards Indigenous peoples. Both were schooled and learned in the British colonial tradition of writing. It makes sense that their works would share similar themes and experiential attitudes. Colonialism and colonial culture carried within it a particular way to see the world.

Canadian texts were no exception in their susceptibility to this colonial influence. During the same era, notably in the decades leading up to the turn of the twentieth century when western settlement developed into a nation-building project, the “management” of Indigenous people was a major concern among settlers and government bureaucrats alike.

Poet, writer, and bureaucrat Duncan Campbell Scott is perhaps the best example of colonial expression in the Canadian context. Scott created many works that contain the white saviour trope, and he was even determined to create a literary tradition in Canada.²² Scott was famous for his poetry and prose, especially his poems that seemingly portrayed him as sympathetic of Indigenous people. As a bureaucrat, however, Scott worked in the Department of Indian Affairs alongside Nicholas Flood Davin, one of the men responsible

¹⁶ Edward Berenson, *Heroes of Empire: Five Charismatic Men and the Conquest of Africa*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 25.

¹⁷ Innis, *The Bias of Communication*, 57.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 27.

¹⁹ Berenson, *Heroes of Empire*, 27.

²⁰ *London Daily Telegraph*, 3 July 1872, quoted in Berenson, *Heroes of Empire*, 41.

²¹ Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 19.

²² E. Brian Titley, *A Narrow Visions: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Administration of Indian Affairs in Canada*, (Vancouver, BC: 1986), 26.

for the creation of the residential school system in Canada. Scott was also a notorious supporter of assimilation and intermarriage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.²³ Because of this Scott was a staunch advocate of the residential school system, as it was designed to make Indigenous people suitable for citizenship through civilization and traditional cultural eradication, and to train them as a labour force.²⁴ Scott's primary concern though was the financial management of the schools and their effectiveness at the lowest cost possible.²⁵

Scott was only a young man in 1879 when he accepted a position at the Department of Indian Affairs. He was financially unable to go to university, so his imperialistic worldview was created outside of the educational institutions.²⁶ In order to secure employment his father used his connections in the government and arranged an interview with the prime minister Sir John A. MacDonald.²⁷ Whether his view of Indigenous people was informed by his religious upbringing, his father being a Methodist minister, or whether it developed during his time at Indian Affairs is unknown.²⁸ But what can be gleaned from his writings is that he was indeed influenced by both.

It has also been noted that his political position seemed contrary to his poetical themes. Some have speculated this was simply in an effort to make his written work more sought after, despite the fact that during his life he was celebrated as a Canadian Confederation Poet.²⁹ Still, the extinction of Indigenous people would have made his poems and depictions of Indigenous people a literary anthropological commodity. His works would have given readers a glimpse at people they never would have met had his aims of assimilation been successful, and that would have made them valuable.

For example, in 1898 Scott wrote the poem "The Onondaga Madonna." The first four lines reveal not only Scott's insistence that the Indigenous people were destined to vanish, but his attitudes towards the people is deeply embedded within the imagery:

She stands full-throated and with careless pose,
This woman of a weird and waning race,
The tragic savage lurking in her face,
Where all her pagan passion burns and glows;³⁰

Already, there is evidence of themes similar to those found in Kipling's poem. However, unlike Kipling who was primarily concerned with the task of civilization and domination, Scott seems to be hinting at outright extinction through words like "waning race" and

²³ *Ibid*, 34.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 75.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 87.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁷ "Duncan Campbell Scott," in *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, 3rd ed., Donna Bennett and Russell Brown, eds.(Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2003), 249.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

²⁹ Brendan F.R. Edwards, "'A most industrious and far-seeing Mohawk scholar': Charles A. Cooke (Thawennensere), civil servant, amateur anthropologist, performer, and writer," *Ontario History* 111, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 86-87.

³⁰ "The Onondaga Madonna," in *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, 253.

“tragic savage.” He saw the Indigenous people and their way of life as something to be eradicated, not through force but through policy. Yet, it is interesting to note that as an advocate of the residential school system, which included Christian studies as part of the curriculum, he juxtaposes the subject of his poem, an Indigenous woman, to a figure of Madonna. This could point to the idea that the “civilizing” schools would remove Indigenous people from their supposed savagery, elevating them to an enlightened position that colonizers believed they operated in. This, of course, is an expression of privilege. Elevating one culture over another, believing that one’s culture is superior to another, is an ethically positioned, self-centred, and privileged view of the world that was one of the key features of the imperial archive and Hughey’s original white saviour definition (See p. 2).³¹ This also led to the tendency to create an “idealization of the primitive,” or the romanticization of Indigenous people, an imperial era literary trope that emerged even in Scott’s writings.³²

Indeed, the idealization of the primitive emerges especially through depictions of savagery and inferiority. Keeping in mind that Scott’s political aim was to assimilate and eradicate the Indigenous people, it makes sense that when he uses the word “savage” it is only in reference to the past. Through his poetry he is imaging that the civilizing mission has succeeded, and is lamenting the pre-contact idealized version of the “noble savage.” On the other hand, depictions of inferiority are less obvious. Inferiority emerges in this passage through use of ‘weird’ and ‘pagan,’ especially since, in Scott’s sentiments, and in enlightened culture in general, paganism is often juxtaposed against the supposed superiority of Christianity.

Notice too, that like Kipling’s poetry, expressions of guilt are not evident in Scott’s poetry. While guilt as an emotion can be difficult to detect, there appears to be no remorse in Scott’s words. That is, he does not appear to feel conflicted about creating policies that would eradicate entire cultures and people. This further supports the idea that expressions of guilt associated with the white saviour trope is a modern reactionary phenomenon to the effects of colonization on Indigenous people.

That said, perhaps it is not enough to note that Scott was a devoted English-Canadian nationalist who “firmly believed in the great civilizing mission of the British Empire.”³³ His poetry is a prime example of colonialism at work within Canadian culture and literature. Through Scott, it is evident how the white saviour trope became embedded in policies concerning Indigenous peoples. Given Scott’s hand in creating and revising the Indian Act policies, and the fact that he worked in Indian Affairs until 1932, his body of work provides the link between imperial era literary texts and the creation of colonial government policies. This is especially true since the Indian Act is still used to this day, and his poetry is a fundamental part of Canadian literary studies still taught in universities.

It is worth noting that when the Act was amended in 1920, Scott was adamant about implementing the compulsory enfranchisement bill. This particular amendment would require Indigenous people to give up their culture completely, and to attend and graduate

³¹ Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 125.

³² *Ibid*, 126.

³³ Titley, *A Narrow Vision*, 25.

from residential schools.³⁴ Only then would they be granted citizenship and able to claim the benefits that came with being a Canadian citizen. In a speech before the House of Commons, Scott proclaimed that “I want to get rid of the Indian problem.[...] Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill.”³⁵ In this we hear not only Scott’s belief in assimilation but eradication as well, something that, as mentioned, emerges in the extinction metaphors in his poetry.

Although bound by Kipling-esque ideas of duty and responsibility to endure the “burden of the Indian,” Scott’s vision of assimilation was also preempted by those who came before him in the government.³⁶ The prime minister, John A. MacDonald, and an Irish journalist and politician, Nicolas Flood Davin, who settled in Canada in the mid 1800s, also applied the British colonization methods to the colonization of the Canadian prairies.

When MacDonald commissioned Davin in 1879, it was to determine if a system similar to the industrial school system in the United States would be suitable to adopt in Canada.³⁷ “The Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-breeds” was the result. Davin’s investigation and subsequent report are thought to be the greatest influences in the decision that led to the creation of the residential school system, a system that was only fully abolished in 1996.³⁸ The effects of the residential school system have now been well documented and are available to all Canadians due largely to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

Unfortunately, the system developed by Davin embraced the idea of *civilizing* the Indigenous peoples, which involved removing the children from their homes, often forcefully, teaching them English, Christianity, agriculture (for the boys), and skills suited for domestic servitude (for the girls).³⁹ To the task of civilization, Davin’s report gives an insightful historical account of how the attitudes towards Indigenous people appeared in official Canadian discourses at the highest levels of government outside the Indian Affairs office. Through Davin, these attitudes would eventually find their way into government policy, but not through sheer volume and manipulation in the way Scott’s ideas found their way into larger policy.

Instead, it was through the cultural adoption of imperial ideas and attitudes in official government documents, or, in other words, an unquestioning adherence to colonial government standards and procedures. Davin’s report is a prime example of the imperial influence blindly following on the heels of an already established system: the industrial school system in the US. His lack of expressed guilt for suggesting a system such as the

³⁴ *Ibid*, 48.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 50.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 36.

³⁷ Note that this was the same year Scott started at the Department of Indian Affairs in Ottawa.

³⁸ Union of Ontario Indians, *An Overview of the Indian Residential School System*, (Dayton: Creative Impressions, 2013), 6.

³⁹ Nicolas Flood Davin, *Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-breeds*, (Ottawa: 1879), 1. Retrieved from <http://eco.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.03651/1?r=0&s=1>.

residential school system is evidence of the imperial privileged attitude. Moreover, it does not appear throughout the report that there was any question of morality in Davin's suggestions. Linguistically, phrases such as "the white man's way," "chronic querulousness," "catch them," and the general likening of an entire race as childlike and helpless point to a sense of perceived Indigenous inferiority.⁴⁰ As such, since Indigenous people were deemed inferior and in need of "saving" through the generous actions of the colonizers, standard considerations of morality were reserved for those deemed as civilized equals and rendered mute. Or as activist and author professor Romand Coles states:

[...] it is difficult to write of generosity today without conjuring up images of the terror wrought by a religion that at once placed the movement of *caritas* and *agape*, giving and love, at the foundation of being swept across the Americas during the Conquest with a holocaust of "generosity."⁴¹

In the end, it is this imperial attitude embedded deep within early Canadian policy that fostered the creation of the white saviour trope within the colony.

To conclude, the movement of the white saviour trope from imperial literature to colonial policy was a complex process, but the devotion to the imperial civilizing mission also created a lack of societal guilt that could have stopped the trope early on. Combined with expressions of privilege, and depictions of savagery and inferiority, these elements worked together in late 19th century texts to facilitate the trope's emergence and subsequent reinsertion into texts overtime.

This is not to say that the important historical figures discussed in this paper were evil men who did not sympathize with some of the hardships faced by Indigenous peoples. Rather, it is just that feeling guilty about such things, and recognizing one's role in colonialism, was not socially encouraged at that time. Unlike popularly accepted textual expressions today, these men felt no guilt in how their actions and words affected Indigenous people.

In the current era, some settlers are coming to terms with what being a settler really means. Expressions of privilege and actions associated with such are still common, but so to are expressions of guilt. However, as I found in my thesis, guilt often only emerges in relation to Indigenous crises and quickly fades when newspaper coverage of the crisis stops. Less popular are depictions of inferiority and savagery, which in the era of inclusion and racial awareness is not surprising, since it is now socially unacceptable to use outright stereotypes in text or speech. Yet, such depictions do emerge in more subtle ways. We only need to think of Hughey's white saviour movies to understand the pervasiveness of these depictions. Perhaps, revealing the trope within select imperial era texts will demonstrate

⁴⁰ Ibid, 8-12; Notice the echo of Kipling's poem in reference to "catching" the people.

⁴¹ Romand Coles, *Rethinking Generosity: Critical theory and the Politics of Caritas*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 1.

the need for settlers to reassess and adjust modern texts to suitably disturb the white saviour trope.

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