

HISTORY  
OF  
BAPTIST INDIAN MISSIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

Few missionaries ever dreamed of a task so large or a position so powerful in American Indian affairs as did Isaac McCoy. He sought nothing less than a portion of the trans-Mississippi West as a permanent Indian state with himself as ruler. In his mind, the welfare of the Indians was intimately bound up with the propagation of the Baptist religion, the establishment of a new country for them, and his own advancement. Church, state, and self were fused into one grand plan for Indian salvation through colonization. To achieve his scheme, he used whatever means came to hand, whether it was his Baptist mission patrons, the political furor over Indian removal, or the establishment of a new missionary society. All of these activities were but successive steps to his ultimate aim of power over Indian affairs for their and his own good.

His writing was naturally harnessed to his goals. Though his most famous work purports in its title, *History of Baptist Indian Missions*, to be a general story of his denomination's missionary efforts among the American aborigines, it is really *his* story of *his* struggle with the forces of apathy and evil to propagate *his* truth to Indians, government officials, missionary managers, and the American people in general. His message was simple: the only way to save the American Indians from extinction was to resettle them away from the blighting influence of bad white frontiersmen. Remove them westward to their own land isolated from whites in order to refine them in white civilization and Christianity. The paradox never seemed to bother him.

The form of the book results from his limited time and his sources. He could only steal spare moments now and then from a very active life surveying and politicking to write the six hundred pages of chronicle. Thus his text

kees, and it was well calculated to prevent the improvement of those tribes, and, indeed, of all the tribes in the territory, by compelling them to feel that they were not secure in their present possessions. A communication on this subject, from a gentleman in the Indian country, reached Washington about the 20th of March, 1836, and was placed in my hands. The causes of alarm were immediately communicated to some influential members of Congress, and also a definite description of the boundaries between the whites and the Indians. Happily, these measures, which would have thrown doubt around the permanency of Indian settlement, were defeated.

About this time the Government desired to extinguish the title of the Ottawas, and of some of the Chippewas north of them, to a large tract of country in the northwestern part of the Territory of Michigan, and a delegation from La Arbacroche, on Lake Michigan, was induced to visit Washington on this business. The main body of the Ottawas was on Grand river and in its vicinity, and these strongly objected to selling any of their country. Twice they met in council, near the Thomas missionary station, and each time resolved that their country should not be sold. But being informed that the delegation from La Arbacroche would probably cede away the whole without the consent of the nation, they resolved to send a delegation to Washington to prevent it. In order to appear aloof, as far as possible, from any thing that would look like making a treaty, they selected for all the members of the delegation, excepting one, such men as were not chiefs, and who consequently were incompetent to treat. For the assistance of this delegation in *preventing* the cession of their country to the United States, Mr. Slater was requested to accompany them. If these Ottawas could have been induced to go west to a permanent home, the extinguishment of their claims in Michigan could not have been regretted, provided it were done by fair and honourable means. But it was pretty soon discovered that a design existed among those who would have much influence in fixing the terms of the treaty, to induce them to sell so much of the country as to secure large annuities, &c., and then keep them still in Michigan, circumscribed to lands reserved for that purpose; and as all knew that the proximity of white inhabitants would soon compel them to leave these reservations, it evidently appeared that a permanent home for them was not contemplated, but that they were expected to be removed northwestward, up the lakes.

If these plans should prove successful, the effect would be: the Ottawas would be detained in Michigan a few years, more

crowded and injured by a white population than they had been previously; their deterioration would daily become more rapid, and then another treaty would be demanded, for the extinguishment of their claims to these reservations. These treaties were looked to by many hangers-on about the Indians as times when large sums of money could be obtained under the title of *claims*, or something else. And lastly, they would follow these degenerating Ottawas up the lakes to their new homes, for the sake of fleecing them of their annuities.

Pending the negotiation, the delegation, which was accompanied by Mr. Slater, presented, through him, to the Commissioner, a written communication, signed by all the chiefs of Grand river, excepting one who happened to be absent, remonstrating against the ceding of any portion of their country. As usual on treaty-making occasions, many of those hangers-on noticed above were present, expecting to profit by the treaty. These appeared to be much offended at Mr. Slater, who was supposed to influence his delegation to persevere in their objections to a sale of their country. On the 24th of March, Mr. Slater came to me, apparently much distressed, and solicited my advice respecting the course he should pursue. I entreated him to remain faithful to the obligations he had come under to the Ottawas in council before he left home. It had been intimated to him that if the treaty could be effected, provision could be made for him of several thousand dollars. I entreated him to reject every such wicked offer; reminded him that missionaries, who generally exercised great influence over the Indians, could many a time have enriched themselves, as traders and many others had often done, by inducing certain treaty stipulations for land or money, but that they had never stooped to accept of a personal favour of one dollar, and that such an act would be far beneath the piety of the Christian and the honourable high-mindedness of the missionary. In these sentiments he appeared most heartily to concur. I advised him to write immediately to the President of the United States, stating the circumstances of the unwillingness of the Ottawas to sell any land, and to send him a copy of the remonstrance submitted to the Commissioner. He requested me to write the form of such a communication as I thought ought to go to the President. This I did, but it was not submitted; and, to my extreme grief and mortification, the treaty was concluded, and signed by the very delegation that was sent to Washington *to prevent it*.

Mr. Slater's plan now appeared to be to take as many Ottawas as would follow him, and purchase land with his money, and

their annuities, within the white settlements, and there form a settlement of Indians. To enable him to do this, an article was inserted in the treaty, which resulted in placing in his hands six thousand four hundred dollars. His plan has been carried out, and he has a settlement of Ottawas, consisting of about one hundred and forty souls, around him, in the State of Michigan. To heads of families, respectively, are assigned small farm lots, perhaps twenty acres. He has a school, and continues to impart religious instruction to the people of his charge. While it is hoped that his desire and efforts to do good to the Ottawas, and the matters of his settlement, will result in his satisfaction, his missionary brethren think that he has erred so as to require them, for the present, to suspend the usual attachments of their fraternity.

Mr. Slater had never concurred with us in our views of securing to the Indians a permanent home in the West. We commenced the establishment on Grand river, in the hope that, during its continuance, its influence would bear in favour of that measure; but, from the time Mr. Slater arrived his influence was thrown into the other end of the scale. During his residence at the station, several Ottawas made profession of religion, who were believed to be genuinely pious. With this exception, it is thought that it would have been better for the Ottawas if the station had been discontinued about the time we closed our affairs at Carey.

The experience of two hundred years has shown to every body, that Indians cannot prosper on small tracts of country, surrounded by people of other colour, other prejudices, and other interests. If Mr. Slater's people should become the owners of land, others will contrive to bring them in debt, and get possession of their lands, with whatever improvements may have been made thereon. It will be seen presently, that subsequent arrangements made it necessary for the Ottawas, excepting such as might have purchased land and settled as citizens, to leave that country in the course of five years from the date of the treaty. About the time that the Ottawas shall be urged to leave the country, it will not be surprising if Mr. Slater's settlement of Indians should increase for the moment. For various reasons, some will be inclined to remain in the country, and this settlement will furnish an opportunity for them to do so. On this account, the formation of the settlement is greatly to be regretted, because it will be keeping them from a comfortable and a secure home, which has been provided for them in the Indian territory, and, judging from the history of the past, they

will, during their stay, be sinking deeper and deeper in degradation and wretchedness.

Seeing that the treaty was likely to be made in such a form that the Ottawas would be kept in an unsettled state, I visited the Secretary of War, and entreated him to order things more favourably. He desired me to visit the Commissioner who was negotiating the treaty, and communicate my views and wishes to him. This I declined. I wrote the Commissioner, and requested that, in the treaty, provision should be made to remunerate the board for the expenses they had incurred in erecting missionary buildings, &c. The treaty, when made, provided that the value of the improvements should be paid to the board; but as those improvements had been made in early times, under great disadvantages, it was not to be expected that the bare valuation of them at this time would be a fair remuneration; I therefore visited each member of the Committee on Indian Affairs in the Senate of the United States, and told them the story, and desired them to so modify the treaty that, in lieu of the value of the improvements, the board should be allowed the *nett proceeds of the sale of one hundred and sixty acres of land*, embracing the improvements. In the mean time, the board, at my request, forwarded, to my charge, a memorial on the same subject. This, with a written communication of my own, came before the Committee. The result was, the treaty was amended as we had requested. And it was also further amended, by which provision was made for the Ottawas to take a permanent residence in the Indian territory, after the expiration of five years. This latter was an unwelcome amendment to many. The treaty provided that very large sums of money should be paid to the Ottawas, or in various ways expended in reference to them; and it was the wish of many to keep them in the regions of the lakes, receding constantly from the advancing settlements of the white man, becoming poorer and fewer, and more degraded every day, and consequently more easily cheated out of their money.

White settlements had by this time approached within a fourth of a mile of the mission premises, and the value of the land allowed for the remuneration of the expenses of the board was *very considerable*, though it has not yet been realized. This we pledged ourselves, both in the memorial of the board and in my communication, should all be applied to the benefit of the Ottawas, for educational and other missionary purposes in future. Many considerations having caused me to feel a deep interest in the welfare of the Ottawas, I was exceedingly