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In colonial encounters over centuries, gifts formed a critical part of how Europeans initiated contact with Aboriginal peoples and established the terms for trade, military allegiance, or peace. At least in this process, if not in others, colonial newcomers attempted to attune themselves to traditional cultural expectations, since gift-giving protocols were embedded in many traditional societies as a means of producing understood relations in the spheres of ceremonial, social, and economic life.<sup>1</sup> By enlisting gifts to enter into those networks of reciprocity and obligation, European explorers, entrepreneurs, and government representatives sought to pursue a range of colonial projects.<sup>2</sup> By the time Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837, the British practice of distributing gifts to Aboriginal peoples as affirmation of the Crown's goodwill was well established. Most importantly, the beginning of her reign coincided with the rise of the 'humanitarian era' in British colonial policy, in which the achievement of British subjecthood through Christianisation and civilisation was seen as the greatest possible gift to extend to Aboriginal peoples.<sup>3</sup> In reality the humanitarian policy agenda was vexed and short-lived, and by the dawn of the

twentieth century when Victoria died, it had long since become reshaped into locally administered programs of governance that controlled almost all aspects of Aboriginal life. The long period of Victoria's reign, then, witnessed a complex set of transitions in the politics and policies of Aboriginal governance within Britain's Empire, which in turn were met with different kinds of Aboriginal resistance and adaptation.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter compares some of the different contexts in nineteenth-century Canada and Australia in which Aboriginal people figured as recipients of the Queen's gifts, particularly on occasions that celebrated or reinforced her sovereignty over Britain's empire. In considering how these gifts were received and how they circulated, it seeks to explore some of the different meanings they generated and the potentially unsettled relationships they implied between Aboriginal people and the Crown. Attempting to understand the positions and motivations of Aboriginal peoples as historical actors is an inevitably problematic project, limited by the very nature of colonial records and complicated by the interpretative dispositions of later readers;<sup>5</sup> but notwithstanding these constraints, the historical records of both countries offer some comparative glimpse into how Aboriginal people regarded the symbolic status of Queen Victoria and made their own use of the gifts given in her name. Canada and Australia share many parallels as sites of British settlement where Aboriginal people were brought within the state's authority through similar legal, administrative, and 'moral' measures designed to transform them fully into their nominal status as the Crown's subjects, but what makes their comparison most interesting here is that their histories of Aboriginal relationships to Queen Victoria had quite different points of origin and quite different trajectories.

The historical attachment of Canada's Aboriginal peoples to the British Crown, and to Queen Victoria in particular, has been well noted. Numerous scholars,

most notably Wade Henry, J. R. Miller, Sarah Carter and Ian Radforth, have examined how Aboriginal people's expressed loyalty to the Great Mother served to establish their own special relationship to the Crown, at the same time as it was exploited by local officials to further government agendas.<sup>6</sup> So enduring was this attachment to Queen Victoria that even decades after her death, when later royal visitors toured Canada, Aboriginal delegations came with pictures bearing her image.<sup>7</sup> The origins of this attachment lay in a long history of diplomatic exchanges between Aboriginal people and the British Crown dating back to the fur trade and the military alliances of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and that during Victoria's reign helped pave the way for the negotiation of treaties.<sup>8</sup> This history of formal diplomacy shaped a more tangible relationship between Aboriginal people and Queen Victoria than was ever apparent in Australia, where there was no history of alliance between the Crown and Aboriginal groups, and no formal acknowledgement of pre-existing Aboriginal sovereignty through treaty negotiations. Nonetheless, despite the absence of a parallel diplomatic history, Aboriginal peoples across Australia's colonies encountered Queen Victoria's representatives in many different kinds of exchange over the long course of her reign. As scholars have argued in relation to specific aspects of this history, such encounters demonstrated the scope as well as the limits of Australian Aboriginal people's capacity to negotiate with the Crown, or with its representatives at the level of the colonial state, in face of an official culture that refused to recognise the existence of independent Aboriginal polities.<sup>9</sup>

In the histories of both countries, commemorative moments that called forth Aboriginal people's formal status as Queen Victoria's subjects are revealing not only of how they were positioned, and positioned themselves, in relation to the Crown, but also of how they engaged, ignored, or otherwise negotiated their relation to local

government authorities. Gifts given to them on behalf of the Crown indicate something of the complexities and contradictions between expressions of imperial unity on the one hand and local cross-cultural struggles on the other, for while these gifts appeared to confirm Aboriginal people's assimilation as Her Majesty's subjects, as objects they also had parallel lives of their own, becoming invested with other meanings and uses that open a partial window onto Aboriginal cultural integrity and independence. In this sense, even as the Queen's gifts apparently fulfilled their role to signal her supreme place as the sovereign of a benevolent Empire, they point towards the fractures in the colonial state's assumed jurisdiction over Aboriginal people.

### **The politics of intimacy and allegiance to the Crown**

In Canada, one of the consistent ways in which Aboriginal people expressed a strong sense of their own traditions as cultural polities was through a politics of intimacy with Queen Victoria that drew on the history of their diplomatic relationship with the British Crown. Other historians have explored how Aboriginal bands frequently reminded Crown representatives of this shared bond by framing it in appellations of kinship.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, as Sarah Carter has put it, Aboriginal people's self-reference as the Great Mother's children can be seen not as a gesture of subservience but as a diplomatic device in which the familial relationship symbolised 'mutual respect and reciprocal duties of nurturing, caring, loyalty and fidelity'.<sup>11</sup>

The way in which intimacy with Queen Victoria endorsed rather than undermined Aboriginal people's own sense of cultural relevance and tradition was visible in how they regarded the gifts given on her behalf. While Crown representatives clearly regarded gifts as a necessary protocol for securing Aboriginal loyalty, Aboriginal people received them as a mark of respect due them as the

Crown's diplomatic partners. Not only this, but there are signs that they also absorbed these gifts into their own cultural traditions and identities. In 1896, Huron chiefs of the Lorette Indian Agency asked the governor general to forward an address to Queen Victoria requesting that the recognition historically granted them in gifts from the English sovereign, now lapsed but dating from 1825 when King George IV received a delegation of their chiefs and bestowed bracelets and medals stamped with his image, would be continued. These bracelets and medals were worn by Huron chiefs on all their occasions of cultural significance, the petitioners argued; they were a vital part of maintaining 'our old customs' and were material symbols of their authority as chiefs. 'We rely upon you', they urged the governor general, to 'persuade the Great Queen to give us these bracelets and medals which we shall be glad to wear at the great feasts of the nation'.<sup>12</sup>

The governor general declined to pursue this request on grounds that the gifts, which he associated with rewards given for Aboriginal allegiance to the Crown in the years following the War of 1812, were not intended to be given 'in perpetuity'. Yet the chiefs persisted in their petition, arguing that the gifts were not given in recognition of loyalty in a time of war but in recognition of their political rank as chiefs within their own national body. For a second time, they argued that a failure to provide 'the bracelets and medals which the then chiefs had and which we the present chiefs have not would prove that our tradition has been abandoned and that our national custom will not be carried out'.<sup>13</sup> Their renewed petition fell on deaf ears, but their claim to the bracelets and medals as an important sign of 'preserv[ing] intact all our old customs' indicates that for them the Queen's gifts marked not just their historical relationship to the Crown, but also the Crown's recognition of their own social and political customs.

If the politics of intimacy with Queen Victoria had continuing purchase for Aboriginal people in endorsing their recognisable status as polities, it had decreasing meaning for the Crown's representatives as the nineteenth century progressed. Canadian government authorities were aware of the significance Aboriginal people placed on the Crown's gifts as signs of respect, and when the protocols of diplomatic tradition demanded it, such as during royal or vice regal tours, they made medals and other gifts ready for distribution to Aboriginal chiefs as commemorative 'souvenirs'. There can be little doubt, however, that beyond a role in securing Aboriginal people's continuing cooperation, they considered such gifts to be little more than a formal gesture to be kept at minimal expense.

When Queen Victoria's son-in-law and Canada's Governor General the Marquis of Lorne toured the North-West Territories in 1881, the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs Lawrence Vankoughnet considered what arrangements should be made for presents to Aboriginal chiefs. Since no funding had been provisioned for this purpose, he suggested that leftover presents from an earlier tour by Lorne's predecessor Lord Dufferin would suffice to fill the gap; these he suggested would prove 'quite sufficient to give the Chiefs' who came to represent their bands at any points on Lorne's itinerary. He advised the governor general's secretary that Indian superintendents would be posted at strategic points along the route to present any chiefs to His Excellency, but also 'to prevent any imposture being practiced by Indians not Chiefs': thus 'there will be a considerable saving in the way of presents, if I am correct in the conclusion that His Excellency will not consider it necessary to do more than present the Chiefs or Headmen with some slight memento'.<sup>14</sup>

An earlier memo on arrangements for the police escort that would accompany Lorne's entourage had advised that 'Clothing & Blankets' would make suitable presents for general distribution during the tour, given the state of Aboriginal destitution affecting the prairies; all Aboriginal people of the North-West Territories would 'be looking to the Government for assistance', and the question was how to 'tide over' their state of near starvation without trouble flaring. Gifts from the government would have strategic value in offsetting the risk of unrest, and would be appreciated as a diplomatic gesture.<sup>15</sup> Since there was no dedicated provision set aside for the general distribution of presents it appears that this advice was not followed, although Lorne did carry medals and supplies to be given as rewards to those who showed 'the best disposition to carry out the treaties' and were prepared to 'persevere in getting a living out of the land'.<sup>16</sup> Despite their parsimony, however, Canadian government officials at least remained aware of the diplomatic significance of gift-giving protocols, indicating some continuing acknowledgement of Aboriginal political sentiment. Two years after Lorne's 1881 tour of the North-West Territories, the government's insufficient attention to this sentiment emerged as an embarrassment when a newspaper reported on the 'disappointment of Indian chiefs at not having received the presents' they expected.<sup>17</sup> This was a matter of 'gross neglect', the superintendent general of Indian Affairs noted retrospectively, since '[t]o such things as these the Indians are peculiarly sensitive'.<sup>18</sup>

In Australia's colonies, of course, there was no formal history of diplomatic relationships to support even as compromised an acknowledgement of Aboriginal political feeling as this.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the Canadian practice of presenting medals to chiefs to commemorate their ongoing relationship to the Crown or its representatives can be compared with the practice across Australia's colonies of presenting



Aboriginal individuals with engraved breastplates as a means of acknowledging or inducing their loyalty to the colonial state. The first known of these ‘badges of distinction’ was given by New South Wales’ Governor Lachlan Macquarie to the famed Aboriginal mediator Bungaree in 1815, and breastplates also were distributed at one of his earliest annual ‘conferences’ with local Aboriginal people as a sign of the government’s goodwill.<sup>20</sup> In comparison to commemorative medals in Canada, which usually bore the engraved image of a member of the royal family, Australian breastplates were both more individually specific and more distinctively cross-cultural in design, often engraved in the European heraldic tradition of coat of arms, but depicting images of native flora and fauna.<sup>21</sup> As was the tradition in Canada, they were initially given to the men presumed to be Aboriginal leaders in the expectation that their good influence would support colonial endeavours more widely.

As an early gesture of diplomacy, Macquarie’s distribution of breastplates to ‘chiefs’ indicated an implicit acknowledgement that Aboriginal groups comprised distinctive polities, but this acknowledgement waned over time as breastplates became widely given not only by government officials but also by settler entrepreneurs and employers as rewards for acts of fidelity, cooperation, or service. Kingplates comprised a particular class of breastplate: in modified continuity of Macquarie’s intent to privilege the position of Aboriginal leaders as agents of influence, they bore the appellation of ‘King’ (or sometimes ‘Queen’) alongside the European nickname of the person who wore them. As the nineteenth century progressed, however, this designation became an increasing subject of mirth within a circulating settler sentiment that Aboriginal people survived only as the destitute remnants of an abject and now disappearing race.<sup>22</sup>

Yet breastplates denoted a more complex set of meanings than those assigned by colonists as symbols either of Aboriginal fidelity or of a people in decline. Like commemorative medals in Canada, they could be taken up by Aboriginal people as a symbol of political agency in a cross-cultural space. At the same time as the Huron chiefs of the Lorette Indian Agency were petitioning Canada's governor general for the Queen's bracelets and medals, Mickey Johnson, an Aboriginal man from Lake Illawarra in New South Wales, suggested to the local member of Parliament that he should receive a kingplate, and arrangements were made to present him with one inscribed with the words 'Mickey Johnson, King'. The press made much comic play on the 'lofty dignity' and 'courtly air' of 'His royal highness' during the presentation, as well as of the homely fact that the local mayor's mother stood in for Queen Victoria in presenting it to him at the 1896 Wollongong Agricultural Show.<sup>23</sup> It also satirised the speech made by King Mickey following his 'coronation', in which he 'dropped into politics' by offering his endorsement to the local member of Parliament and pledging that if Queen Victoria should 'ever need his assistance it would be readily given her'.<sup>24</sup> No doubt, jested Sydney's *Evening News*, when Britain's foes learned of King Mickey's pledge they would abandon all thoughts of war 'as being entirely futile'.

Despite the press's derision, Mickey Johnson's speech can be seen as asserting an affiliation with Queen Victoria that brought his own place in the local scene of Illawarra into play with the very heart of Empire. In a wider sense, he claimed and received a certain authority that crossed the political and cultural domains of Aboriginal and white worlds. As a well-known local figure, he was photographed extensively during his lifetime, wearing the kingplate with equal ease over a bare torso or a European suit. In 1899, he was instrumental in establishing a church for the

new Lake Illawarra Aboriginal mission; and although apparently a sign of his acceptance of colonial projections, this public status gave him considerable access to the white community that enabled him to advocate for his people's interests in the district over the coming years.<sup>25</sup> His influence as a local political figure took on a national scale after his death, his image featuring on a 1938 sesquicentenary commemorative stamp.

In all these respects, in Australia as in Canada, gifts from the Crown or its representatives might be taken by Aboriginal people as reinforcing their cultural and political status in ways that were quite different from colonial expectations of acquiescence to the colonial project. In so far as Aboriginal people sought to be recipients of such gifts, as the Huron chiefs and Mickey Johnson did from opposite sides of the world in 1896, their wishes cannot simply be configured in terms of self-identification as the Queen's subjects; as Alan Lester and Fae Dussart have argued, they can be seen as acts of mobilisation in which Aboriginal people sought to achieve cultural and political recognition within the global field of Empire.<sup>26</sup>

By the same token, Aboriginal people used their formal status as subjects of the Queen's Empire to petition for resources at the local level. That this was a practised pattern in Canada during vice regal tours was evident in the memo on police escort arrangements for Lord Lorne's tour of the North-West Territories in 1881:

the demands made by the Indians will be very great and His Excellency will be told that it is impossible for them to live on what Land and money is given them by Treaty. They will ask for more of both, as well as for more oxen, cows, and implements. His Excellency will have to listen to the same story that is told to every one who they think has the power to give them more, and they will on this memorable occasion make a great effort to obtain better terms. This is always the case with Indians.<sup>27</sup>

A similar pattern was evident in Australia when governors toured regional districts. When South Australia's Governor Dominic Daly visited the southern districts in 1864, Aboriginal people turned out to greet him, reportedly in demonstration of their 'loyalty' to the Queen and her representative, but the fact that they had other motivations in mind was made clear by their petition for better provisions on the grounds that settlement had destroyed their access to native game.<sup>28</sup> Their address to the governor, some parts of the press noted, 'shows that the blacks understand the knack of getting up a memorial quite as well as the whites. They praise his Excellency, they compare themselves advantageously with the blacks who kill whitefellows in the North; they then state their grievances and end by asking not only for "tomahawks and shirts" but also for "tobacco and big one tuck-out"'.<sup>29</sup> As colonial officials were aware, then, Aboriginal people were adept in enlisting the rhetoric of loyalty to the Crown as a means of engaging its representatives at the level of local colonial policy.

### **Celebrating the Queen's birthday**

Perhaps the occasion which most tellingly traced the complex intercultural politics of Aboriginal people's relationship to the Crown over the course of decades was the annual celebration of Queen Victoria's birthday on 24 May, an event that routinely included an allowance of 'presents' or provisions as a reminder of the Queen's solicitous care of her Aboriginal subjects. The nature of Aboriginal people's engagement with the Queen's birthday diverged in Canada and Australia, shaped by the historic differences in their affiliation to the Crown as well as by the different degrees to which their everyday lives were subjected to governmental oversight. Yet

in both countries, the material provisions made to them on the Queen's birthday opened up the potential for an independent social and cultural existence that extended well beyond the intended message of the Queen's unifying sovereignty.

The role of Aboriginal people as participants in the 'Queen's Day' celebrations was more overt in Canada than was ever the case in Australia's colonies, a symptom not just of Canadian Aboriginal people's historic links to the British Crown but also of the political attention that treaties enabled them - even if with limited effect - to demand from local government authorities. Keith Thor Carlson and Robin Fisher have considered the political dimensions of Aboriginal attendance at Queen's birthday celebrations in New Westminster, British Columbia, during the 1860s.<sup>30</sup> When Frederick Seymour was appointed governor in 1864, he invited local Aboriginal constituencies to a Queen's birthday assembly at Government House as an opportunity to show that he would be as solicitous of Aboriginal welfare as his predecessor James Douglas, and they accordingly responded positively with expectations that their land base achieved under Douglas' liberal regime would be protected.<sup>31</sup> Under Seymour's governorship, however, the land policy implemented by Douglas was steadily undermined by Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works Joseph Trutch, who worked to ensure that Aboriginal claims would not stand in the way of colonial settlement.<sup>32</sup> By the end of the 1860s, Carlson notes, the Queen's birthday celebrations at Government House had come for Aboriginal people 'to epitomise government indifference and dismissive paternalism'.<sup>33</sup> In 1875, with Trutch now installed as lieutenant governor, Salish chiefs of the Fraser River declined to have any role in Queen's birthday celebrations, writing to the Indian commissioner that '[s]he has not been a good Mother and Queen to us. She has not watched over us

that we should have enough land', nor 'compel[led] the British Columbia Government to extend our present reserves'.<sup>34</sup>

In British Columbia, then, the declining trajectory of governmental attention to Aboriginal land interests can be traced in Aboriginal people's declining participation in the Queen's birthday celebrations as an act of political diplomacy. By the end of the 1870s, as Aboriginal populations across the prairies became increasingly confined to reserves, references to Aboriginal participation were notably absent from press reports on the Queen's birthday celebrations that annually attracted large numbers of people into towns.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, some Aboriginal reserve populations continued to mark Queen Victoria's birthday each year. The Six Nations Agency's annual receipts for the Queen's birthday events over the 1870s and 1880s, reimbursed by the Department of Indian Affairs, describe a range of activities similar to those held by Anglo-Canadian town populations: additional supplies of food were ordered; bands were organised; races and games were planned. Indian Superintendent Jasper Gilkison reported each year on the fine weather and the success of the festivities, as well as on his efforts to maintain economy. Only once, in 1878, did he report that events were marred 'by several cases of drunkenness' due to whisky brought onto the reserve by outsiders; for this violation he fined the perpetrators fifty dollars and emptied the liquor onto the ground.<sup>36</sup> On the whole, however, he was pleased to report each year that the participants behaved in a manner that 'would have been creditable to any part of the Country'.<sup>37</sup> In 1887, the year of the Queen's Jubilee, he reported that the 'assemblage of Indians appeared larger than on any previous occasion; that the arrangements were well carried out in a manner to the enjoyment of all, and reflected credit upon their general good conduct'.<sup>38</sup>

For Department of Indian Affairs' officials, it seems, celebrating the Queen's Day on the reserve provided a reassuring opportunity for reinforcing Aboriginal attachment to the Crown and demonstrating the residents' advancement in desirable behaviour. It was also seen as a safe avenue of enjoyment through which the dangerous influences of the world outside could be avoided: as Indian Agent on the Cape Croker Agency John McIver wrote, 'the Indians ... should be encouraged to [celebrate the Queen's birthday here rather] than going out amongst the whites and be exposed to numerous temptations'.<sup>39</sup> But at the same time, reserve-based Queen's Day celebrations also gave Aboriginal people opportunities for community cohesion beyond the prying eyes of Indian Agents. As agents sometimes acknowledged outright, on reserves with sizable populations it was impossible to keep detailed track of people's movements and activities.<sup>40</sup> Although agents had managerial oversight, Aboriginal people held considerable autonomy in planning Queen's Day events, to which friends and relatives could be invited. The fact that they participated in Queen's Day festivities in large numbers indicates the potential of these occasions for reinforcing social and community ties. Indeed, just as the sovereign's gifts of bracelets and medals became regarded by the Hurons as part of their 'national custom', so too the Queen's birthday annual festivities were considered to be central to the Hurons' 'old customs' on the Lorette Indian Agency.<sup>41</sup>

In Australia's colonies, a government-administered reserve system was, with the exception of Victoria, much slower to evolve than in Canada, and there were no treaties to support the efforts of colonial officials to secure a program of Aboriginal management. Instead, from early in Queen Victoria's reign the distribution of 'presents' on the Queen's birthday formed part of administrative efforts to conciliate Aboriginal people to colonial authority and win them over to 'Christianity and

civilisation'. In 1839, South Australia's new Governor George Gawler initiated a Queen's birthday 'dinner for the natives' on the grounds of Government House, anticipating the way that future colonial officials like British Columbia's Governor Seymour used the Queen's birthday as a diplomatic opportunity. Balanced with its message of the Crown's goodwill, Gawler's Queen's birthday dinner held an explicitly civilising intent. In its first year, this took material form in gifts distributed to each person who came: clothing and a blanket, and a pewter plate engraved with Queen Victoria's image and the letters of the English alphabet.<sup>42</sup>

The Queen's birthday 'dinner for the natives' continued through the 1840s, but as time passed and dispossession drove Aboriginal people further into deprivation, it transformed from an occasion for cross-cultural diplomacy to one when Aboriginal people merely received a 'dole of provisions'.<sup>43</sup> By 1849, the Queen's birthday dinner had become a distribution of rations consisting of a piece of beef, a two-pound loaf, and a blanket, and the governor did not even attend as the Crown's representative, as he had in former years.<sup>44</sup> By the early 1850s, this annual 'dole' was further reduced, the meat substituted for 'an extra allowance of bread'.<sup>45</sup> The earlier presents presented to Aboriginal people as a sign of the Crown's goodwill had become replaced with the distribution of rations as a sign of the Crown's 'charity'.

The enduring form of this perceived charity was the annual distribution of blankets to Aboriginal people that took place across Australia's colonies on the Queen's birthday.<sup>46</sup> Each year the colonial press reported on the blanket distributions alongside descriptions of the Queen's birthday balls, the picnics, and the Governor's levees from which Aboriginal people were excluded. Amongst some commentators, the annual blanket distribution produced expressions of contempt for the recipients themselves as 'decrepit', 'grotesque', 'mendicant', or even 'defiant'.<sup>47</sup> Amongst



others, it was cause for criticism of the government's parsimonious response to widespread Aboriginal deprivation. Settlers sometimes wrote letters to the press pointing out that Aboriginal people were entitled to better recompense for having been 'despoiled of their lands'.<sup>48</sup> But although such commentary acknowledged partial responsibility for the forcible appropriation of Aboriginal land and resources, it was usually assuaged by appeal to a colonial humanitarian rhetoric in which compensation in the form of a blanket was proof of Christian sympathy. By the late nineteenth century, the Queen's blanket had come to hold a fixed meaning within settler culture as a charitable concession to a destitute people fast approaching a state of extinction 'beyond hope of redemption'.<sup>49</sup>

But if the blanket distributions triggered debate about the future of Aboriginal people within the colonial state, they also triggered the question of Aboriginal people's nominal status as subjects of the Queen, in whose name the blankets were annually bestowed. In 1874, *The Moreton Bay Courier* argued that although the connection between 'her Majesty's blankets, blacks, and birthday' was not initially obvious, it became so 'when it is remembered that the gift of a blanket to a black on Her birthday is likely to ... impress the recipient, black though he be, with an exalted idea of that lady's power and excellence'.<sup>50</sup> Indeed in some regions, the blanket distribution would close with 'three cheers for the Queen' as an explicit reminder of her connection.<sup>51</sup> Other commentators were more dismissively pragmatic: there was 'no particular reason' why the Queen's birthday should be 'a red-letter day' amongst Aboriginal people, observed a writer in *The Queenslander*. 'At any rate, the loyalty evoked by the present once a year of a half-crown blanket on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May can scarcely be of a very fervent type'.<sup>52</sup> In fact, as rations distributions spread out to take place at distant depots, the press noted declining numbers of Aboriginal people

coming into town to receive the traditional Queen's birthday blanket, rendering its intended message of her benevolent sovereignty even more marginal.<sup>53</sup>

But what meanings and uses might the Queen's blanket have held for Aboriginal recipients? To the chagrin of local authorities, it was clear that blankets circulated amongst Aboriginal people in ways that defied their given intention either as an earlier sign of the Crown's conciliating goodwill or as a later sign of its charity. For a start, blankets held use for Aboriginal people as a form of currency that could be exchanged for coin, rations, or other goods. In 1896, one correspondent to the press noted that the government-issue blankets meant only for Aboriginal use could be found for sale in every store and were used in every public house.<sup>54</sup> Their circulation as objects of trade raised regular concerns that, even before the sun had set on the Queen's birthday, the blankets could be bartered away for liquor.<sup>55</sup> Authorities were also concerned that Aboriginal people's tendency to redistribute the blankets amongst themselves as a shared resource undermined attempts to instil 'civilised' habits and the value of individual possessions. In 1856, New South Wales' Legislative Assembly debated whether 'the money expended in supplying blankets was entirely thrown away, because in many cases they were torn up and divided among the wilder blacks ... while in other cases they were bartered away almost immediately after they were received'.<sup>56</sup> The suggestion was that rather than giving blankets 'in the way of gratuity', they should only be given as reward 'for industrial occupations'.<sup>57</sup>

In reality, blankets were distributed in myriad other contexts than as the Queen's birthday annual 'present', given as payment by settlers and colonial officials as rewards for Aboriginal assistance.<sup>58</sup> That this was so over the course of decades reinforced the reality that they had value and uses for Aboriginal people that had little to do with the idea of the Crown's compassion. They formed a hard currency in

Aboriginal people's economic exchanges, and as an internally shared resource they became part of the material repertoire of Aboriginal society.<sup>59</sup> In this sense, Michael Smithson has argued, blankets held an important place within the context of the traditional exchange relationships that regulated and supported Aboriginal cultural identity.<sup>60</sup>

### **Afterlife of the Queen's gifts**

The different trajectories of Aboriginal people's relationship to the Crown in Canada and Australia were visibly manifest at the time of Queen Victoria's death in January 1901. In Canada, the significance of Aboriginal people's intimate connection to the Great Mother was expressed in the addresses of condolence many bands scripted to their 'brother' and new monarch, King Edward VII. The address of the Chippewas of the Ojibway nation exemplified the idea that Aboriginal people held a privileged relationship to Queen Victoria, stating that while sorrow at 'the death of Our Beloved Mother' was 'shared by all loyal subjects throughout the Empire, we being the subjects of Her more peculiar care, feel the bereavement more keenly'.<sup>61</sup> The Six Nations address carried this special relationship forward to her son through the framework of a bereavement ritual in which the grieving Edward would be nurtured by his brother chiefs and 'allies'. In an inversion of the familiar representations of Queen Victoria herself as the source of loving care for the Empire's peoples, the Six Nations chiefs assured the new King of their own solicitousness. When his tears caused blindness, they wrote, 'your brother Chiefs' will 'wipe off the tears ... so that you may clearly see'; when his head was bowed with sorrow, 'your brother Chiefs' will 'support your head and ... raise you up'. The chiefs closed with a scene of cultural affirmation and equivalence in which they imaginatively accompanied the new British

sovereign 'to the grave of Her late majesty our Mother the Queen' where they 'decorate[d] the grave with wreaths, made of sweet grasses and forest flowers'.<sup>62</sup>

Such feeling can hardly be more different from the general dearth of reported Aboriginal responses to the Queen's death in Australia. Certainly, there seemed little incentive for Aboriginal people to associate this event with anything other than the potential disappearance of the blankets, as was noted by one Queensland correspondent to the press. When his Aboriginal employee learned that Queen Victoria had just died, he wrote, the 'elderly blackfellow ... asked me about the blankets which it was usual for the Government to supply', and stated that with the game scarce on the land his people would experience 'great difficulty' if the blanket distributions ended. The correspondent's glib response was an assurance 'that although Kings and Queens might come and go, the annual distribution of blankets to his people would go on for ever'.<sup>63</sup>

Yet while it was evident that Aboriginal people in Canada nurtured their relationship to the Queen more than was the case in Australia, where there was no history of allegiance to lend that relationship political substance, this distinction would be too simple in describing Aboriginal people's more complex relationships to the Crown in both countries, and of their shared scope to elude expectations of acquiescence to British sovereignty. The presentation of gifts or provisions to Aboriginal people by Queen Victoria's representatives carried a set of messages designed to demonstrate their place as Her Majesty's subjects within an overarching framework of benevolent colonial governance that was perceived to define her reign. Over time, the intended meaning of these gifts varied, shaped by the different needs of colonial authorities to civilise, placate, or otherwise incur the cooperation of Aboriginal peoples. In this sense, these material objects or goods often said more

about the vexed relationship between Aboriginal people and the local colonial state than they did about Queen Victoria's place as sovereign of an empire. But above all, the meaning and value of the objects given to Aboriginal people in the name of the Queen always appeared to overreach those they were intended to impart. They were enlisted by Aboriginal people to emphasise their own cultural and political status in a cross-cultural sphere, and they circulated internally within Aboriginal society in ways that expressed continuing social and community cohesion. While for Crown representatives the presents distributed on Queen Victoria's behalf may have articulated the British settler state's jurisdiction over Aboriginal people, the ways in which they were received and used suggest that the Queen's sovereignty over her Aboriginal subjects, and thereby the authority of the settler state, was always incomplete.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Redmond and Fiona Skyring, 'Exchange and Appropriation: the *Wurnan* Economy and Aboriginal Land and Labour at Karunjie Station, north-western Australia' in Ian Keen (ed.), *Indigenous Participation in Australian Economies* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2010), pp. 73–90.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Lorraine Aragon, 'Twisting the Gift: Translating Precolonial into Colonial Exchanges in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia', *American Anthropologist*, 23:1 (1995), 443–60; Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Herbert Applebaum, *Colonial Americans at Work* (London: University Press of America, 1996); Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Arthur Ray, Jim Miller, and Frank Tough, *Bounty and Benevolence: A History of Saskatchewan Treaties* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> British Parliamentary House of Commons, Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements), 7 (1837), no. 425.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Lester and Fae Dussart, *Colonisation and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance: Protecting Aborigines across the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Maria Nugent, "'The Queen Gave Us the Land": Aboriginal People, Queen Victoria and Historical Remembrance', *History Australia*, 9:2 (2012), 192.

<sup>6</sup> Wade Henry, 'Imagining the Great White Mother and the Great King: Aboriginal Tradition and Royal Representation at the "Great Pow-wow" of 1901', *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 11:1 (2000), 87–108; Sarah Carter, "'Your Great

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Mother across the Salt Sea”: Prairie First Nations, the British Monarchy and the Vice Regal Connection to 1900’, *Manitoba History* 48 (Autumn/Winter 2004–2005), pp. 34–48; Ian Radforth, ‘Performance, Politics, and Representation: Aboriginal People and the 1860 Royal Tour of Canada’, *The Canadian Historical Review*, 84 (2003), 1–32; J. R. Miller, ‘Victoria’s “Red Children”: The “Great White Queen Mother” and Native-Newcomer Relations in Canada’, *Native Studies Review*, 17:1 (2008), 1–23.

<sup>7</sup> Library and Archives Canada (LAC), PA-131185, ‘Their Majesties greet chieftains of the Stoney Indian Tribe, who have brought a photo of Queen Victoria’, 26 May 1939.

<sup>8</sup> For instance J. R. Miller, “‘I will accept the Queen’s hand”: First Nations Leaders and the Image of the Crown in the Prairie Treaties’, in *Reflections on Native-Newcomer Relations: Selected Essays* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 217–41.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Michael Parsons, ‘The Tourist Corroboree in South Australia to 1911’, *Aboriginal History*, 21 (1997), 46–69; Jane Lydon, ‘The Experimental 1860s: Charles Walter’s Images of Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, Victoria’, *Aboriginal History*, 26 (2002), 78–130; Maria Nugent, *Captain Cook Was Here* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Jessie Mitchell, “‘It will enlarge the ideas of the natives”’: Indigenous Australians and the Tour of Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh’, *Aboriginal History*, 34 (2010), 198; Ann Curthoys and Jessie Mitchell, “‘Bring this paper to the Good Governor”’: Indigenous Petitioning In Britain’s Australian Colonies’, in Saliha Belmessous (ed.), *Native Claims: Indigenous Law Against Empire, 1500–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 182–203; Maryrose Casey, ‘Colonisation, Notions of Authenticity and Aboriginal Australian Performance’, *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, 8 (2012), 1–18.

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- <sup>10</sup> For instance, Radforth, ‘Performance, Politics, and Representation’; Miller, ‘Victoria’s “Red Children”’.
- <sup>11</sup> Carter, ‘Your Great Mother across the Salt Sea’.
- <sup>12</sup> LAC, RG 10, vol. 2841, file 172,535, Huron chiefs to Governor General, 26 March 1896.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Huron chiefs to Governor General, July 1896.
- <sup>14</sup> LAC, RG 7, G23, vol. 2, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs to Governor General’s Secretary, 15 July 1881.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, ‘Route Transport Escort’ Memorandum 24 March 1881 (no author identified).
- <sup>16</sup> LAC, G 10, vol. 3768, file 33642, ‘His Excellency’s Councils with Indians of the North West’, forwarded Minister of the Interior, 4 November 1881.
- <sup>17</sup> *The British Columbian* (21 November 1883).
- <sup>18</sup> LAC, RG 10, vol. 3666, file 10147, Superintendent of Indian Affairs to Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, 8 December 1883.
- <sup>19</sup> Mark McKenna observes that until the late twentieth century each royal visit to Australia marked ‘a forgetting of the Aboriginal occupation of the continent, in which Aboriginal people were reduced to decorative adornment or viewed as curiosities destined for the museum’. Mark McKenna, ‘Monarchy: From Reverence to Indifference’, in Deryck Schreuder and Stuart Ward (eds), *Australia’s Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 266–7.
- <sup>20</sup> Keith Vincent Smith, *King Bungaree: A Sydney Aborigine Meets the Great South Pacific Explorers, 1799–1830* (Kenthurst NSW: Kangaroo Press, 1992); *Sydney Gazette* (4 January 1817).



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- <sup>21</sup> David Kaus, 'Aboriginal Breastplates', National Museum of Australia, [www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/captivating\\_and\\_curious/the\\_stories\\_behind\\_the\\_objects/aboriginal\\_breastplates](http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/captivating_and_curious/the_stories_behind_the_objects/aboriginal_breastplates).
- <sup>22</sup> For instance, 'King Billy of Buninyong: A Biography', *South Bourke and Mornington Journal* (24 August 1887).
- <sup>23</sup> *The Evening News* (4 February 1896), p. 3.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Michael Organ, *Illawarra and South Coast Aborigines 1770–1900* (Academic Services Division Papers, University of Wollongong, 1993).
- <sup>26</sup> Lester and Dussart, *Colonisation and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance*, pp. 116–7.
- <sup>27</sup> LAC, RG 7, G23, vol. 2, 'Route Transport Escort', Memorandum 24 March 1881 (no author identified).
- <sup>28</sup> *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser* (16 January 1864).
- <sup>29</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald* (6 January 1864), p. 5; *Brisbane Courier* (12 January 1864), p. 2.
- <sup>30</sup> Keith Thor Carlson, *The Power of Place, the Problem of Time: Aboriginal Identity and Historical Consciousness in the Cauldron of Colonialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), pp. 211–31; Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774–1890* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992), pp. 158–9.
- <sup>31</sup> Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, pp. 146–58.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 162–3.
- <sup>33</sup> Carlson, *The Power of Place*, p. 212.
- <sup>34</sup> Cited in Miller, 'Victoria's "Red Children"', p. 13.

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<sup>35</sup> *The Brandon Mail* (28 May 1891); also for instance *The Prince Albert Times* (30 May 1884); *The Edmonton Bulletin* (26 May 1892). An exception was the year following the North-West Rebellion, when Lieutenant-Governor Edgar Dewdney spoke at a Queen's birthday parade in Qu'Appelle to assure onlookers that the government's effort to 'check' Aboriginal disloyalty at that time had 'aided very materially in suppressing the rebellion' (*Qu'Appelle Progress*, 28 May 1886).

<sup>36</sup> LAC, RG 10, vol. 2060, file 9851, J. T. Gilkison to Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 1 June 1878.

<sup>37</sup> LAC, RG 10, vol. 222, file 43,496, J. T. Gilkison to Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 26 May 1886.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, J. T. Gilkison to Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 27 May 1887.

<sup>39</sup> LAC, RG 10, vol. 2973, file 209,525, Indian Agent John McIver to Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 5 May 1899.

<sup>40</sup> LAC, RG 18, vol. 1139, file 173/1889, Agent Pocklington to Indian Commissioner, 11 December 1889; LAC, RG 18, vol 1077, file 321/1887, Agent Begg to police reported by Inspector Superintendent W.M. Herchmer, 9 June 1887.

<sup>41</sup> LAC, RG 10, vol. 2807, file 162,869, Indian Agent Antoine Bastien to Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 8 June 1895.

<sup>42</sup> *The SA Register* (25 May 1839).

<sup>43</sup> *The SA Register* (26 May 1849), p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *The SA Register* (26 May 1851), p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Smithson notes that although ultimately framed as charity, blanket distributions originated in early administrative efforts to quell frontier violence.

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Michael Smithson, 'A Misunderstood Gift: The Annual Issue of Blankets to Aborigines in New South Wales, 1826–48', *Push*, 30 (1991), p. 75.

<sup>47</sup> For instance, *The Clarence and Richmond Examiner* (27 August 1876), p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> *Border Watch* (22 January 1870); *The Inquirer and Commercial News* (5 August 1863).

<sup>49</sup> *Kalgoorlie Miner* (22 July 1896).

<sup>50</sup> *The Moreton Bay Courier* (2 June 1860), pp. 4–5.

<sup>51</sup> *The Western Star and Roma Advertiser* (16 May 1896), p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> *The Queenslander* (13 June 1874), p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> For instance, *The Brisbane Courier* (25 May 1865), p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> *The Clarence and Richmond Examiner* (9 June 1896), p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal* (11 August 1890), p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> *Empire* (11 December 1856), pp. 2–3.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* This argument framed debates about the distributions of rations more widely in both Australia and Canada. See Amanda Nettelbeck and Robert Foster, 'Food and Governance in Colonial Australia and Western Canada', *Aboriginal History*, 36 (2012), 29–34.

<sup>58</sup> For instance, Quarterly report of the Protector of Aborigines, *The SA Register* (6 November 1854).

<sup>59</sup> Christopher Anderson, 'Aboriginal Economy and Contact Relations at Bloomfield River, North Queensland', *Newsletter of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies*, 12 (1979), 34; William Simeone, *Rifles, Blankets, and Beads: Identity, History, and the Northern Athapaskan Potlatch* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), pp. 21–4; John Lutz, 'After the Fur Trade: the Aboriginal Labouring

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Class of British Columbia 1849–1890’, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 3:1 (1992), 69–93.

<sup>60</sup> Smithson, ‘A Misunderstood Gift’, p. 87.

<sup>61</sup> LAC, RG 10, vol. 3027, file 230,470, Resolution of the Special Council Meeting, Chippewa Hill, 26 January 1901.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, Address of Condolence from the Six Nations, 5 March 1901.

<sup>63</sup> *The Western Star and Roma Advertiser* (26 January 1901), p. 3.