**The Idea of the "Indian"**

**Stolen Lives: The Indigenous Peoples of Canada and the Indian Residential Schools**

**Chapter 2**

What are the ideas the first Europeans brought with them to Canada to determine how they would respond to the Indigenous Peoples they encountered? European voyagers, clergymen, merchants, and, later, policy makers in the so-called New World projected an array of ideas onto the people they would describe as Indians. Those ideas were formed even before contact, when Europeans responded to the encounters with non-Europeans in other places, such as Asia and Africa. When they met the indigenous populations in North America, peoples of whom they had little knowledge, Europeans imposed these older ideas and stereotypes.

This reading is designed to explore these prejudices and stereotypes. Many of these ideas are still circulating in the media today, and it is important to learn the origins of these problematic notions. A word of caution: the language in the excerpts below is offensive and racist. The offensive words and terms are not presented here as valid; instead, they provide opportunities to study how stereotypes work.

When the French and British began to receive news about North America from merchants, explorers, and missionaries, the local people were often described as noble, simple people. Some Europeans imagined the indigenous communities as an ideal primitive society, living freely in a simpler and more peaceful state than in Europe. Other Europeans also described them as barbaric, a term the Greeks and Romans used to describe people who did not speak their language or share their culture.

At other times, Europeans used the term savage to describe people they believed to be uncivilized. In the seventeenth century, Francis Daniel Pastorius, the founder of Germantown, Pennsylvania, wrote about the local people he encountered:

*The natives, the so-called savages . . . they are, in general, strong, agile, and supple people, with blackish bodies. They went about naked at first and wore only a cloth about the loins. Now they are beginning to wear shirts. . . . They strive after a sincere honesty, hold strictly to their promises, cheat and injure no one. They willingly give shelter to others and are both useful and loyal to their guests. I once saw four of them take a meal together in hearty contentment, and eat a pumpkin cooked in clear water, without butter and spice. Their table and bench was the bare earth, their spoons were mussel-shells with which they dipped up the warm water, their plates were the leaves of the nearest tree, which they do not need to wash with painstaking after the meal, nor to keep with care of future use. I thought to myself, these savages have never in their lives heard the teaching of Jesus concerning temperance and contentment, yet they far excel the Christians in carrying it out.*

The Europeans, fascinated by the life they discovered in the Americas, quickly placed the people they called Indians inside their own worldview. Many Europeans were devout Christians, and to them the Indian represented humanity in its infancy; they likened these people to Adam and Eve.The Europeans believed that the differences between themselves and the Indians could be overcome in a civilized and religious environment. Thus, the “savages” could become just like them—European.

But this view of indigenous life had a darker side. The Western image of indigenous people in North America led many to the judgment that were also uncivilized, animal-like creatures. For example, the French priest Louis Hennepin did not spare the First Peoples he encountered in 1683 from his harsh judgment. His report on this encounter led to a crude assessment of these “uncivilized” people:

*The Indians trouble themselves very little with our civilities, on the contrary, they ridicule us when we practice them. When they arrive in a place, they most frequently salute no one . . . If there is a chair before the fire, they take possession of it, and do not rise for any one. Men and women hide only their private parts . . . They treat their elders very uncivilly . . . There conversation whether among men or women is generally only indecency . . . They never wash their platters which are of wood or bark, nor their bowls or their spoons . . . They eat in a snuffling way and puffing like animals . . . When they eat fat meat, they grease their whole faces with it. They belch continually. Those who have intercourse with the French, scarcely ever wash their shirts, but let them rot on their backs. They seldom cut their nails. They rarely wash meat before putting it in the pot . . . In fine, they put no restraint on their actions, and follow simply the animals.*

Connection Questions

1. As you read the two passages, what strikes you about their tone? Psychologists explain that all of us bring our own biases into our experiences. Those biases impact how we respond. What biases do you think each of the authors brought into their experiences with the indigenous people they encountered?
2. In the reading Culture, Stereotypes, and Identity, we encountered positive and negative stereotypes about Indigenous Peoples. Where do you find examples of both kinds of stereotypes in today’s readings?
3. How can we combat stereotypes?