

## **Rummagings 19: The “North American Indian” in John Rae’s *New Principles***

A particularly arresting aspect of John Rae’s historically and conceptually important *Statement of Some New Principles on the Subject of Political Economy* (1834) is his discussion of the mentality, practices, and prospects of indigenous peoples in the Americas. If Rae had merely contented himself with an application of the four stages theory to Amerindians, as did many eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century followers of Adam Smith, his discussion would scarcely invite or warrant attention, but his goal was more ambitious. By combining the framework of Smith’s theory that all societies develop through four stages – the savage, the barbaric (or pastoral), the agricultural, and the commercial – based on their modes of subsistence with his own observations of indigenous peoples, he wished to show that economic prosperity flows from decisions about “sacrificing present goods for future hopes” that in turn flow from past and persisting “social and cultural conditions” (Barber 237). In doing so, he “identified the conceptual core of what would later become the accepted neoclassical theory of interest,” and demonstrated that “distinctive,” “valuable and fundamental economic ideas could germinate in the soil of the New World,” specifically the soil of central Canada.” For those reasons alone the discussions of the behaviours and activities of the “North American Indian” (2: 82) on which Rae based an important part of his theory are worth examining in detail.

The Canadian laboratory in which Rae arrived at his thesis about Amerindians lay in two areas on the north and south shores of the St. Lawrence west of Montreal, and perhaps in Montreal itself. After emigrating from his native Scotland to Montreal in or around 1822, he moved to Williamsburg on the Raisin River in Glengarry County, where he worked as a schoolmaster until 1831, when he returned briefly to Montreal before moving to Godmanchester in Godmanchester township, where he was living in 1832 and 1833. As his biographer R. Warren James notes, Godmanchester township, which was then “bounded on the south by the Trout and the Chateauguay rivers and on the north by the St. Lawrence” “contains the Canadian part of the St. Regis Indian reserve,” a settlement straddling the Canada-U.S. border that was begun by a “band of Catholic Iroquois from Caughnawaga” who “settled . . . [there] about 1755” (1: 33).<sup>1</sup> After leaving

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Godmanchester, Rae again lived briefly in Montreal before moving late in 1834 – shortly after the publication of *New Principles* in Boston – to Hamilton, Canada West to become the village schoolteacher. After a chequered career in Hamilton he left Canada for the United States and later the Hawaiian Islands, never to return to Canada. He died in Staten Island at the age of seventy-seven in 1872.

In the opening chapter of the first of the three books of *New Principles* Rae grounds the argument that undergirds his thesis about the character and behavior of the Amerindians by quoting Cicero's statement in *De Officiis* 1.4.11-12 to the effect that the capacity of human reason "to join together the present and the future" "encite[s] and enable[s]" human beings "to provide beforehand whatever may be requisite for utility and ornament, not only to himself but to his wife, his children, and all others who may be dear to him, or whom it may be his duty to protect" (2: 80-81). "This provident forethought distinguishes . . . [humans] from the inferior animals," Rae argues, adding with an implicit nod to the four stages theory that "the degree to which . . . [a man] possesses it marks his rank in the scale of civilization (2: 81): members of a society at the agricultural or commercial stages of development possess a higher degree of "provident forethought" than those at the barbaric and, especially, the savage stages. With his thesis in place, Rae reasons that when a man has "gained . . . knowledge of the nature of things around him" and "found many that satisfy more or less perfectly his present needs," he comes to realize through further "observation" and understanding that, although he cannot "alter the nature of things," he can "alter the chains of events proceeding from them or depending on them" in order to "put in his possession, objects" such as farm instruments and fences that are "fitted to supply more perfectly or abundantly what probably will be his future wants" and, thus, "provide for the future" (2: 82).

To illustrate his thesis and argument Rae turns to a representative "North American Indian" as an example of a man at the savage stage of existence who possesses only a modicum of "providential forethought." Landing "in his canoe" on an island and "[f]inding near it a good station for fishing," "he paddles his canoe to shore," where, drawing upon "his knowledge of the nature of the things around him," he makes himself comfortable by "kindling . . . [a] fire" (2: 82). After a "cold and wet" night, he then constructs a shelter to shield himself from the wind and rain and uses a large "piece . . . of bark" and some "soft branches and leaves of the white pine" to make a "dry and soft bed" (2: 82-83). Finally, resolving to return to the spot in future seasons, he clears a space around a "small wild plumb

tree” that he has discovered so that it can thrive and yield “a more abundant crop” (2: 83). This last activity seems at odds with Rae’s thesis and argument, but that possibility is scotched in a footnote: the clearing of a space for the plumb tree to expand is merely “a possible supposition, but it is more probable he would neglect it, [or] perhaps cut it down for the sake of reaching more easily the fruit it carried” (2: 83n). In other words, the likelihood is greater that a stereotypical “North American Indian” “thinks not of providing for any future want the means to supply which, will, without this,” continue to “exist in sufficient abundance” (2: 83).

When Rae returns to the “North American Indian” in Book 2 of *New Principles* it is in a discussion of “[t]he effective desire of accumulation” (2: 131, 130) in which he offers a compelling alternative to the received view that the accumulation of wealth and possessions is “primarily a function of saving arising from the profits of a capitalist class” (Barber 237). Basing his alternative in part on the four stages theory and in part on his own observation of Amerindians, Rae argues that “[t]he life of the hunter” – a member of a society at the savage stage – “seems unfavorable to the perfect development of the accumulative principle”:

In this state man may be said to be necessarily improvident, and regardless of futurity, because, in it, the future presents nothing, which can with certainty be foreseen, or governed. The hunting grounds . . . belong to the nation or the tribe, which alone therefore, can make more abundant provision for futurity by securing to itself a domain more extensive, or better supplied with wild animals; or meet poverty, by being restricted to one more narrow, or barren. As regards his future means of living, every member of such a community thinks of nothing but whether the supply of game will be plentiful, or scanty; in the one case, he knows that he will enjoy abundance, in the other that he must endure want. In such societies therefore, the view can never be directed to any future good, which present exertion might secure to the individual, but is confined to what, by that exertion may be added to the power, or the territory of the tribe. (2: 131-32)

In sum, “[t]he whole thoughts, and affections” of “the Indian” centre on “the whole band, or little nation to which he belongs”: he has no “cares for a distant futurity, either for himself, or his offspring, separated from the common sufferings or enjoyments of his tribe” (2: 132).

As a result of a community’s need to increase its “power” and “territory,” the hunter’s life of “abundance” and “want,” “feasts” and “fasts” is mired in “continually destructive wars” with other “tribe[s],” “band[s],” or “little nation[s],” for if a group occupies “a healthy territory, and one plen-

tifully inhabited by game, they are pressed on by others, eager to seize the advantages” (2: 132). “War is always a game of hazard,” he continues, but in the savage “state of society it is particularly hazardous” because there “the art of war is surprise”:

The scanty population which the chase can alone maintain, is divided into small bands, living widely apart – mere points in a vast continuity of wilderness. In such situations warfare can never be open. The attacking party must advance with secrecy; were they to make their approach known, their enemies would only wait for them, if convinced of their own superiority; otherwise, they would retire, and, if acting prudently, and skillfully, never suffer themselves to be seen, unless to strike their foes, themselves being safe, in some well-conducted ambush. But where success depends upon concealment, and surprise, it also depends on chance. No precautions can succeed in always guarding a small band, encamped in the midst of a great forest, from being unexpectedly assailed . . . The effects of these circumstances are increased by the character of the laws of war of the savage. His wars are the wars of extermination . . . he can neither safely let his enemies go, nor possibly retain them captive . . . Hence it is not conquest, as with other warriors, but destruction, that is his aim, and what he executes on others, when he has the power, he sees continually impending over him, from them, when fortune gives the power. (2: 132-33)

“[T]he whole existence of the hunter is chequered by quick changing extremes. Abundance, famine, the fierce joys of victory, the horrors of surprise and defeat, rapidly succeed each other, in an order which he can neither pretend to foresee, nor direct. Like all men in similar circumstances, he refers the events, of which his being is the sport, to the continual and capricious agency, of supernatural powers” (2: 133). In such circumstances, “[t]he effective desire of accumulation” as Rae understands it is all but absent.

Having thus established to his satisfaction that the circumstance of the hunter’s existence have given “the Indian . . . a character altogether his own” (2: 134), Rae turns to “the present condition” of Amerindians in North America, focusing on what he regards as its most remarkable feature: “their neglecting, or refusing to adopt the arts” – that is, the skills and techniques – “of the new neighbours which the discovery by Europeans of the country they inhabit, brought . . . with them.” Adding to a “deficiency . . . of the effective desire of accumulation” as a cause of the plight of Amerindians is the diminution or destruction by the Europeans’ “settlement of their country” of the “political importance of their tribes” and “the

ties binding together the members of each community, and leading them to feel, and to act, in common” (2: 135).

Hence the Indian continues to seek shelter in apathy, and to regard life and its enjoyments, both for himself and his children, as did his forefathers, gifts to be made the most of while they last, but which no care can secure, and which, therefore, it is his business not to provide for the continuance of, but to learn calmly to resign when called on . . . He thus sits, listless, in the midst of the incessant activity and industry that surround him, incapable of discovering an adequate cause for the never-ceasing care and toil. The motives that excite the white man . . . are to him incomprehensible. Instead of applauding the conduct, in his secret soul he censures the mean, timorous, and, as it seems to him, selfish spirit, which prompts it. (2: 135)

To Rae, anyone who dismisses “industry” and “toil” as activities driven by a “selfish spirit” is deeply misguided because, contrary to Smith, he sees the motivation of “[t]he effective desire of accumulation” not merely as self-interest, but, as he explains elsewhere in *New Principles*, as residing in two factors: the “intellectual powers” that “give rise to reasoning and reflective habits” such as financial prudence, and “the *social and benevolent affections*” that prompt individuals “to procure good for others” and to think beyond “mere personal interests” towards the “future goods” of their family and their community (2: 122, 124). “[I]ndustry” and “toil” provide the basis for feelings and behavior that are beneficial – indeed, essential – to society as a whole.

Unlike many other writers before and after him, Rae does not ascribe the “apathy” of Amerindians to a “repugnance to labor” but, rather, to a reluctance to engage in “labor” for which the reward is not “immediate”:

Thus, besides their peculiar occupations of hunting and fishing, in which they are ever ready to engage, they are much employed in the navigation of the St. Lawrence, and may be seen laboring at the oar, or setting with the pole, in the large boats [*bateaux*] used for the purpose, and always furnish the greater part of the additional hands, necessary to conduct rafts through some of the rapids. (2: 136)

“Nor,” he argues, “is the obstacle aversion to agricultural labor” on the part of Amerindians, for “[w]here returns from agricultural labor are speedy, and great, they are also agriculturalists”:

Thus, some of the little islands on Lake St. Francis, near the Indian village of St. Regis, are favorable to the growth of maize, a plant, yielding a return of a

hundred fold, and forming, even when half ripe, a pleasant and substantial repast. Patches of the best land on these islands are, therefore, every year, cultivated by them, for this purpose . . . [and] thoroughly weeded, and hoed. (2: 136-37)

The advantage to cultivation land on islands is that they are “inaccessible to the cattle” owned by European settlers and, therefore, “no fence is required” (2: 137). “If this additional outlay [were] necessary,” Rae surmises that cultivation of areas on the islands would be abandoned as it had been on “the commons adjoining” St. Regis, not because the labour required to construct fences would be repugnant, but because of “the distant return from that labor.” “Similar observations will apply to all the remnants of the race, scattered through the parts of the North American continent, to which the industry and enterprise of the white man, have brought modern arts and civilization,” Rae concludes; “[t]hey thus afford a striking instance, of the effects resulting from a great deficiency of strength in the accumulative principle” (2: 137, 138).

Before leaving the Americas to examine the “ancestors” of inhabitants of Europe, Asia, and Africa, Rae turns to Paraguay as an example of the ways in which Europeans “endeavoured to be . . . [the] benefactor” of colonized peoples (2: 138). Basing his commentary on Pierre-François de Charlevoix’s *Histoire de Paraguay* (1752) and Juan Jorge and Antonio de Ulloa’s *Noticias Secretas de America* (1826), Rae argues that in Paraguay the Jesuits were partially successful as benefactors because of their “clear perception of the actual circumstances of the condition, and disposition of the men with whom they had to deal, and . . . their usual ability in converting these circumstances into means of accomplishing the ends they had in view” – namely, the conversion of Amerindians to Catholicism and “the introduction of the arts and powers of civilization” (2: 139). To these ends,

They wrought upon the Indians through that, which was alone in them capable of exciting to extended action, their love of their several nations, and devotion to their interests: they took every means to show that they could, and would, promote their interests, and thus identifying themselves with the national existence and prosperity, transferred to their order, a large portion of the strong feelings arising from benefits received from, and obligations and duties owing to his tribe, which are the great movers, and rulers, of the being of the Indian. (2: 139)

By first teaching the Amerindians of Paraguay agriculture and then “finer and more difficult arts” such as carpentry, joinery, painting, and gilding,

the Jesuits eventually “led into efficient action the desire . . . [of] every individual . . . for the future prosperity of his tribe” and, hence, the “powers of social and benevolent affections of the mass” and “the desire of accumulation of the whole body” (2: 142). Rae does not, however, paint an entirely rosy picture of the activities of the Jesuits in Paraguay, but concludes his analysis by observing that the “Indian” recipients of their teachings and practices “bec[a]me, or were becoming, mere machines in the hands of the missionaries.”

### Coda

As Rae was probably well aware, if his thesis regarding the “North American Indian” was to be convincing it would need to take account of the presence of a strong “accumulative principle” in contemporary western Europeans, who must also be descended from hunters at the savage stage of social development. After all, had not the Roman historian Tacitus and numerous subsequent writers likened the earliest Europeans “to the savage aborigines of North America” (2: 143)? It is quite possible that Rae considered treating the Romans as the European equivalents of the Jesuits in Paraguay, but discarded the idea on realizing that it would not explain either how the Romans acquired the “desire of accumulation” or, indeed, how it came to exist in areas that they did not conquer, such as Scotland and most of Germany. If the “North American Indian” is apparently unable to move beyond the savage stage without external help (and even then only partially), then how did the ancient Europeans manage to do so?

Rae’s answer is to assert that “[t]he race, whose occupation of the forests and wildernesses, to the northward of the Roman Empire . . . were properly shepherd warriors” not savage hunters. From this premise, it follows that “the possession of flocks and herds, implies a considerable degree of care and foresight, both in protecting them and making provision for them, and in avoiding to consume too great a number of them.” Even the mode of warfare “natural” to ancient Europe’s “shepherd warriors” gave them an advantage:

it is always open; concealment is out of the question . . . They have not therefore to fear being surprised and overcome . . . They see that chance has less influence, prudence and resolution more . . . They perceive that their fate de-

pend, in a great measure, on themselves . . . Their minds are less shaken, and their judgments less clouded by superstitious fears and imaginings. The greater security they enjoy renders them also less relentlessly cruel. Utterly to exterminate their enemies is not necessary; to break, and drive them off, is sufficient. When . . . fury of the fight is over, mercy has with them a place. (2: 143-44)

“All these circumstances pertaining to the condition of pastoral nations tend strongly to excited the social and benevolent affections, and the powers of reason and reflection, and to give scope to their action among them . . . Such nations have, therefore, naturally a much higher effective desire of accumulation than nations of mere hunters” (1: 144). Naturally.

### Notes

- 1 In fact, St. Regis (Saint-Régis, Akwesasne) was settled through Iroquois (Mohawk) migrations in the 1750s and 1760s (see Trigger and Désy). In addition to land on the shore of the St. Lawrence, it contained several islands, including Cornwall Island (Grand Île de Saint Régis). James’s biography of Rae is the source of the information about his movements that is given here. For a broader discussion of Rae’s ideas, see my “Rummagings 12.”

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