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## THE STORY OF SITTING BULL'S STRENGTH: THE CASE OF CANADIAN GOVERNMENT

**Résumé :** L'article porte sur l'attitude de Sitting Bull et sa bande au Canada. Sitting Bull était un « saint-homme » et chef indien de la tribu des Sioux Hunkpapas Lakota pendant les années de sa résistance à la politique du gouvernement américain. L'une de ses réalisations les plus marquantes était la victoire sur le 7<sup>e</sup> régiment de cavalerie du lieutenant-colonel George Custer à la bataille de Little Big Horn du 25 juin 1876. Il a conduit sa bande constituée des Sioux et des Premières Nations ainsi que des Autochtones américains des Etats-Unis jusqu'à Montagne de Bois (Mont Wood), en Saskatchewan, au Canada, où ils sont restés jusqu'en 1881. La même année, il s'est rendu à l'armée américaine et ce n'était qu'une poignée du célèbre groupe qui a décidé de rester au Canada. La première partie de l'article est consacrée à la nation des Sioux en tant que telle. La seconde partie se concentre sur l'analyse des contrastes entre ce que les Canadiens pensaient et ce qu'ils disaient de Sitting Bull et de sa bande, leur véritable position et son rayonnement.

The stay of Sitting Bull and the Sioux in Canada in 1877 – 1881 is closely connected to the well-known Canadian myth about “Peaceable Kingdom”. This pastoral myth (or the vision of a social ideal) lies at the heart of all social mythology. The nostalgia for a world of peace and protection, with a spontaneous response to the nature around it, with leisure and composure not to be found today, is particularly strong in Canada. In its most common form it is, of course, associated with some earlier social condition as it is obvious in the painting by Edward Hicks. Painted around 1830, it represents a pictorial emblem of the reconciliation of man with man and of man with nature. According to Northrop Frye, this quest for the peaceable kingdom is close to the haunting vision of serenity identified in the Canadian tradition. The painting serves as the best representation of the Canadian desire to maintain order and stability at all cost (Frye 284). According to this pastoral myth, the qualities that Canadians supposedly prize more highly than their neighbours are safety and security, order and harmony. In his essay “Why We Act Like

Canadians,” Berton returns to “the national preoccupation of Canada that can be characterized by peace, order and good government” (Berton 30).

However, Robert Anson Heinlein once said, “You can have peace. Or you can have freedom. But do not ever count on having both at once“. This truth turned out to be at the heart of Sitting Bull's Canadian stay, because the influx of Sioux into Canada quickly developed into an unexpected national problem. This escape followed the most prominent action of the Great Sioux War of 1876—the overwhelming victory in the Battle of the Little Bighorn on June 25-26, 1876. In this battle, combined forces of the Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes defeated the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment of the United States Army, including a force of 700 men led by Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer. The battle had far-reaching consequences. The only thing that the scattered tribes were able to do was to surrender or escape. That is why Sitting Bull and his followers, counting 135 Dakota lodges –about a thousand people—crossed the Canadian border in May 1877 (Brown 290). At first it seemed that the Sioux were welcomed and could live peacefully in Canada, at least they initially thought so. Furthermore, this vision of the Sioux living non-violently in the North was strongly supported by this popular perception of a Canadian tradition of disinterested altruism, as it has already been explained. Nevertheless, the Sioux turned out to be big trouble for the Canadian government and Canada's participation in peacekeeping in case of Sitting Bull's group was primarily motivated by its own strategic interests (Maloney 102).

### **The Reasons**

First of all, it is important to recall the fundamental reasons of Sitting Bull's escape to Canada as they are closely connected to the later development of events. As the victor of the Battle of the Little Big Horn, Sitting Bull refused to surrender and relocate to the Great Sioux Reservation in South Dakota and Nebraska. He felt he should be dictating terms to Colonel Nelson A. Miles, and not the other way round. The Siouan pride was hurt. The Sioux were tired of wars, they sought peace. Furthermore, the band continued to roam about Montana in search of increasingly scarce buffalo, but the constant travel, lack of food, and military pressure began to take a toll. Hoping to find safe haven from the U.S. Army and looking for shelter as well as food sources for the group, Sitting Bull finally abandoned the traditional homeland in Montana and went north across the border into Canada, the Grandmother's Land (Brown 289).

## Canadian Grandeur

The participation of Canada in the whole process was in the beginning outwardly based on unbiased cooperation. The above mentioned well-known Canadian myth says that Canadian leaders were a bit more “reasonable and sensitive” about Indian affairs than the USA, their a bit more aggressive counterparts to the south. Nevertheless, Canadian authorities did draw conclusions from the problems the USA had to face as far as the Native Americans are concerned. That is why Canada accepted the Sioux in 1877, offering them shelter—but that was all. The Canadians were really careful, for any friendly actions towards the Sioux could have been seen as an example of anti-Americanism, which could potentially have led to conflicts with their southern neighbours. And Canadian goal was not to lose but rather to profit from the whole situation. They did not grant the Sioux any land reserve, because Sitting Bull and his Sioux people were not British subjects and were therefore not entitled to any official residence (Manzione 45). The government simply wanted to show the Canadian praised noble-mindedness and generous, peace-loving character. According to the scholars Clay S. Jenkinson and Larry C. Skogen, the government initially even refused to force Sitting Bull to return to the USA, because they did not support slavery and the U.S. government handled the Sioux in such a way (Jenkinson). By allowing the (not really welcome) Sioux to stay in their land, offering them shelter, their primary interest was to show the Canadian grandeur. By initially accepting the Sioux they also wished to look better than the USA on the international level. It was a unique diplomatic chance for the British Crown to spotlight the qualities they possessed. They were willing to accept the Sioux due to the benefits it brought them at first. The international reputation was the key issue; it was their own interest number one. The Canadian government was not truly and honestly interested in the Siouan well-being. What was more important for them was their own outward appearance in comparison to that of the USA. The main thesis of Clay Jenkinson is that if it had not been beneficial for Canada, they would not have done it (Jenkinson).

The truth is that the Canadians were not particularly glad to see Sitting Bull and his company, not even in the beginning. They only tolerated them. According to Dee Brown, Sitting Bull was seen as a source of trouble (Brown 392). They viewed him not only as a potential troublemaker, but also as an expensive guest, because additional mounted police had to be assigned to watch him. The Canadians were definitely not willing to let the Sioux settle in Canada permanently. The Sioux were simply American Indians who took refuge in Canada and could by no means claim to be British Indians (Brown 392). Nothing else could have been expected from the Queen’s government except protection. By remaining supposedly neutral their aim was actually to demonstrate their principles rather than help the Sioux.

## American Involvement

Secondly, the involvement of the USA was similarly ambivalent. According to the author of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, when Sitting Bull fled to the Grandmother's Land, the American soldiers dared not go there to kill him (Brown 290). That is why he ran away – in order to escape the Americans who were forcing him to surrender and move to the assigned reservation. Being free in Canada, Sitting Bull was thus an abomination to the US government. As a dangerous symbol of subversion, he was endangering the authority of the US government. There were only two possibilities for Sitting Bull that the USA would agree with. They wanted him either to obediently surrender, obeying their rules; or to get rid of him. They wanted Sitting Bull to return back voluntarily. Sitting Bull of course refused to do that, so the only other existing option remained to get rid of him completely—to let (or force?) the Canadian government make him a Canadian Indian. Canadian authorities refused to do so. The US government was afraid that Sitting Bull would cause problems in both Canada and the USA at the same time, thus creating an international incident (Brown 392). Having a peaceful sanctuary on the territory of the present day Saskatchewan, Sitting Bull could continue threatening the white citizens of the USA. According to Joseph Manzione and his book *I Am Looking to the North for My Life*,

Nonreservation Indians threatened white society. Canadian territory might have been used as a base for raids into the United States, thereby endangering relations between the two countries. The threat could be the expense of another Indian war, a blow to the pride and national spirit of Americans who believed in the superiority of the white race and the strength and goodness of American culture, the example set for reservation Indians, or the physical anxiety felt by citizens of the towns and mining camps on the western frontier. Unless the Government takes prompt and vigorous measures to chastise the Sioux, the disaffection will be enormous (Manzione 12 & 50).

The US War Department therefore became frenetic in its attempts to do something with the Sioux. General Alfred Terry knew what he was talking about when he said, “the presence of the large body of Indians, bitterly hostile to us, in close proximity to the frontier is a standing menace to the peace of our Indian territories” (quoted in Manzione 53). Their main worry was that Sitting Bull and his Sioux group could possibly serve as an inspiration for other tribes. In this respect, he could be compared to Geronimo, who was free in Mexico (Brown 392). Sitting Bull was simply a thorn in their flesh. That was also the second main interest of the Canadian government. As the months passed gradually by, they found out that the whole situation was becoming more and more uncomfortable and problematic, especially as far as their relationship with the USA was concerned. According to

*Canada's First Nations* by Olivia Dickason, "Once more there was fear of an American invasion when the USA demanded that the refugees be forced to return" (Dickason 170). It was getting complicated and suddenly their primary goal—keeping up appearances—did not matter as much for the Queen's government as keeping peace with their neighbours to the south. The Canadians therefore quickly adjusted to the demands of the situation and deprived the Sioux of their last advantage—superintendent Major James Morrow Walsh, who against all odds acted as a peace-loving intermediary between Canadian authorities and the Sioux (Anderson 15).

The original role of "Sitting Bull's boss", as this North-West Mounted Police officer was popularly nicknamed, was to persuade Sitting Bull to return to the US and live on a reservation. However, Sitting Bull was furious with the Americans, and stated several times that he could not return because the US Army would kill his people; he only came to Canada to find peace. Walsh thus acted as a mediator—he was present during all occasions, making sure the Sioux understood the meaning of the laws that Canadian authorities issued. Furthermore, he also reported to the government about the conditions as well as needs of the Sioux. During the Sioux's stay, Walsh simply managed to keep peace in the region near his Wood Mountain post in present-day Saskatchewan. He also developed a strong friendship with Sitting Bull in the meantime (Anderson 14). Sitting Bull promised Walsh to cooperate, not to violate the laws, and to punish those who would do so. He was able to keep the promise in the beginning; however, the young tribesmen, striving for recognition of warriors and not being used to semi-sedentary life, started to steal horses and thus acted against the Canadian law. They sometimes crossed the Canadian boundary when hunting the buffalo and stole some cattle from American farmers (Welch 255). Although Walsh handled the situation quite well in the end, this was considered an offence and contributed to the growing number of problems. Moreover, when the government noticed the friendship between Walsh and the Sioux, they realized that it is more an obstacle to the Sioux's return to the USA than a means of speeding up the relocation. According to *I Am Looking to the North for My Life*, "Gradually, the police officers' attitudes had changed. Sympathy turned to toleration, and then to mild contempt, an evolution that reflected changes in attitudes and policies in Ottawa. Walsh laboured to maintain good relations with the refugees, but his independence and his magnanimity toward them provoked distrust among his superiors, and his position would soon be compromised" (Manzione 118). Therefore the Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, had Walsh transferred from Wood Mountain to Fort Qu'Appelle, which was a longtime Hudson's Bay Company trading post and a growing farming community 160 trail miles northeast.

The presence of Walsh in the Siouan case again illustrates the interests of Canada – at first he was sent to secure peace and demonstrate the Canadian

pacifism and neutrality, and later he was sent away when they realised he is actually unable to force the Sioux to leave. In other words, it stopped being “convenient” for them to have him participate in the Siouan case.

### **Buffalo Case**

Thirdly, it is important to stress the role of the buffalo in the story. It is true that one of the reasons why the Sioux decided to go to Canada was its (food) resources. However, according to Olivia Patricia Dickason, they “streamed north into the Cypress Hills area at a time when northern buffalo hunters were heading south into the region in pursuit of the remaining herds” (Dickason 172). The food sources thus quickly became inadequate for so many people. The presence of 5000 Sioux had a dramatic impact on the number of the buffalo so each year there were fewer and fewer of them. When the Canadian tribes realized that the buffalo were becoming fewer, they started blaming the Sioux. According to Ian Anderson, “the government did not want to burden itself with the cost of feeding the Sioux” (Anderson 80). Having the group of the Plains Indians in their country was becoming more and more uncomfortable, and more and more problems were involved. Continuing slaughter of the buffalo herds by both Indians and the Whites had reduced their numbers to such an extent by 1878 that there were only small scattered herds remaining. Not only the Sioux but also Canadian Indians were close to starving (Manzione 145). Therefore it became one of the key interests of the Canadian government to literally get rid of the Sioux as quickly as possible, because they had a serious negative impact on the number of the buffalo. This was the last straw for the Canadians and it influenced the decision of the hungry Sioux as well. As a result, by the summer of 1880, an estimated 3,700 Sioux had returned to their own country (Manzione 145).

### **Final Message**

To sum up, the Canadian government played a decisive and controversial role as far as Sitting Bull's Canadian exile is concerned. The arguments mentioned above support my conviction that their participation was not utterly unbiased. Although they did not openly reject the Siouan pleas for shelter, they tried to do what they could to actually make the Sioux return to the US. At each phase of the exile of the Sioux—be it in the beginning, during their stay or in 1880—the Canadians favoured their own interests, keeping them first place. However, the question whether the return of Sitting Bull to the USA truly fulfilled their expectations and wishes remains unanswered. Perhaps a quote from Black Elk (Medicine Man and Holy Man of the Oglala Lakota Sioux) could serve as an

impulse to think, enlightening the situation a bit: “The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize at the centre of the universe dwells the Great Spirit, and that its centre is really everywhere, it is within each of us” (Black Elk).

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