

COLONIZATION

Attempts to describe the invasion of the American continent invariably employ the terms "colonize" and colonization." Although they are often employed to define a period of three hundred years after Columbus reached North America, the events set in motion during this time still carry momentum today. In fact, it may be argued that the colonization of the New World is an ongoing process, carried out by different actors at different stages through largely the same processes.

The colonization of the American continent is difficult to comprehend in isolation from preceding events which evolved over many centuries. Social, economic and political developments in Europe which prompted colonization culminated in an era referred to as the INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION; and although the revolution is historically an 18th century phenomenon the process which carried it to its finale was at work several centuries in advance.

To understand colonization we must look at different stages of human development within the context of social, technological and scientific inventions over hundreds or perhaps thousands of years. We may have to begin with the changes which the advent of agriculture brought to the hunting and gathering societies of the Stone Age. First of all, cultivation of the land and the growing of crops required settlement. Secondly, the more constant food supply brought an increase in population; this in turn resulted in more densely populated areas and eventually gave rise to larger and larger urban centres. Once people became settled they were more vulnerable to attacks from competing societies and therefore sought greater protection through internal organization. This protection was organized and supervised by monarchial power, namely kings or emperors who reigned over serfs and peasants presumably by "divine right." These monarchs often fought with each other and some amassed tremendous wealth and political power over large territories, while others ruled over smaller kingdoms, in constant fear of other "feudal" entities. This age is referred to as the age of FEUDALISM. The prestige of emperors and kings was held in place by the clergy, the religious organizations of medieval or pre-industrial Europe, and the Roman Catholic Pope in particular. Political and religious power went hand in hand. During Columbus' day the Pope was the most powerful authority in Europe.

The crusades to the Holy Land, three centuries earlier, had resulted in the discovery of new commodities and ushered in a period of trade with other countries. From the beginnings of "The Society of Merchant Adventurers" emerged later stock companies in which merchants invested varying amounts of capital to finance exploration of other countries. There they harvested raw materials or commandeered the round-up of cheap labour for the production of new commodities. Through overproduction they gained a surplus for which further ventures established markets. Adam Smith, author of *Wealth of Nations*, wrote in 1776: "England founded a great empire for the sole purpose of raising up a people as customers." Sir Walter Raleigh, (1552 - 1613) the famous pirate and slave trader, stated: "Who rules the trade of the world, rules the wealth of the world and consequently, the world itself."

Science and technology came to the aid of merchant adventurers. The compass was invented and allowed for travel in hitherto uncharted waters.

Shipbuilding was improved by better design and more durable sails. Countries with access to the ocean led the competition for world trade. First Portugal, then Spain and later France, Holland and England took part in the colonization of Africa, America and Asia.

The African slave trade began half a century before the discovery of the New World. When the Native people of the Americas proved too difficult to recruit, African slaves were imported to work the cotton and sugar plantations of wealthy European landowners. Sirs J. Raleigh and J. Hawkins of England brought 14,000 slaves to the American South West - a small number compared with the 60,000 who died at sea. For every one who reached the New World, five or six died aboard the slave ships, which, ironically, were called "The Jesus" and the "St. John the Baptist."

The age of merchant power, also referred to as the age of MERCANTILISM, came into full force with the Cromwellian revolution in England when the newly liberated and educated middle class took control of the state. The power of royalty and religious authority became greatly reduced. France too, also through revolution, became a nation-state controlled by the wealthy middle class. The economic success of private individuals in world trade gave these individuals with capital a dominant role in society. The name CAPITALISM refers to private economic power and political control.

When North America became colonized by the French the success of trade in furs required the labour and co-operation of the Native people. Frenchmen achieved this partly by bribery and partly through coercion. Though colonization was rationalized as being motivated by the desire "to Christianize the heathens of the New World" it was financed by the merchants of Paris, Rouen and Lyons which held the trade charter for furs - and realized enormous profits by it. The English defeated the French and continued this trade through two major companies, the Nor'Western and the already well-established "Company of Merchants and Adventurers of Rupertsland," better known as the Hudson's Bay Company. To the English as well as the French, Native disregard for the obviously superior rights of European colonizers, came as a surprise. It was frustrating to realize that Indians would and could not be enslaved. When they tired of the demands of the white man they faded into the hinterland into which few Europeans dared to venture. They remained a labour force of independent nature until the fur resources became depleted. However, the INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION created the cheap work force required by the colonies.

The revolution had displaced hundreds and thousands of peasants when their small farms were confiscated and turned into sheep farming operations to produce the raw material for the textile mills in industrial centres. Thieves and vagabonds became a threat to the wealthy. The "London Committee" arrived at a solution to the problem: "The removing of the surcharge of necessitous people, (in other words, the "surplus population") to the colonies, to rid themselves of "the fuel of dangerous insurrections and to leave the greater plenty to sustain those remaining with the land."

The colonies then, became the "safety valves" for high social pressure built up by exploitation and oppression of European peasants which were shipped as INDENTURED SERVANTS to labour for the lords of the fur trade. Many were very young, only 14 or 15 years old. It is reported that five hundred children were

spirited away annually over a period of twelve years. At least one ship is said to have carried men and women convicts to the New World, who had committed crimes such as non-payment of tax, unlawful absence from place of work, petty theft and murder. ("The British rulers came from a society in which the lives of their own subjects, especially the poor, were evaluated very cheaply; thus the theft of a loaf of bread was a capital crime.")

Colonization had many victims. Colonized nations, no doubt, fared the worst and continue to feel the effects of the same disregard for themselves as did those who first encountered Europeans more than three hundred years ago.

Displaced European peasants of the Industrial Revolution at least became free people when the time of their indenture expired. Some, unfortunately, became victimizers themselves. In North America those who married Native women under the rules of the Hudson's Bay or the Nor'West companies defied the barriers the colonizers imposed on them and inherited the deferential treatment conferred upon Indians. These mixed-blood people feel the effects of colonization to this day also.

The disregard of Indians toward the power of colonizers prompted them to seek other means whereby to render powerless the Indigenous population of North America. They implemented policies by which over the years they hoped to achieve the same results as those which had formerly enslaved the Indigenous peoples of other continents. The 20th century has seen the struggle for liberty of many formerly colonized nations. Asia and parts of Africa have achieved their freedom. South America is engaged in a bitter liberation process at present. North American Indians may have to employ the same tactics which were used to retard their progress in the past - manipulation of policies inscribed in the Canadian Constitution - or else?