



Aboriginal teachings showed us the way

by Kathleen Maynard

"It's a subject sadly neglected," began Dr. Olive Dickason, as she proceeded to share her thoughts at the Media Club of Ottawa's March 24 dinner meeting. For all those in attendance, Dr. Dickason shed new light on Canada's aboriginal heritage.

Beginning with a discussion of the effect of the Americas on Europe, Dr. Dickason pointed out the immediate material effect. "In the 50 years following the Spanish Conquest, gold and silver circulating in Europe tripled." The amount of silver exported from the Americas increased ten-fold, "16,000 tons of silver, worth 3.3 billion dollars, came out of the Americas within those 50 years." That was the documented amount—Dr. Dickason said it is estimated that another 10,000 tons was exported illegally.

What was the effect in Europe?

According to Dr. Dickason, the effect was enormous, and is still felt today.

Gold and silver became the basis of wealth, rather than land. Inflation hit the economy. The rise of capitalism was made possible. Religion diminished as economic forces began to dominate. "In Europe, churches dominate the skyline, in the Americas, bank and insurance buildings dominate the skyline," Dr. Dickason remarked.

Our relationship with our first nations shaped the development of Canada from the outset, beginning with its very name. While many people trace the origin of "Canada" to Jacques Cartier and the Iroquoian word "kanata," Dr. Dickason stated that "Canada" was already on the maps before Cartier arrived. She related an alternate theory that has not received wide recognition—the Cree word "canatum" means "clean land." In those days, "Canadian" referred to the people who lived on the north shore of the St. Lawrence. Everyone else was "American." The French settlers were known as *les canadiens*.



Dr. Olive Dickason is a recipient of the National Lifetime Achievement Award, presented by Governor General Romeo LeBlanc at the National Aboriginal Awards Ceremony in Calgary in February.

Why did the Europeans come?

They came from Europe to fish on the Grand Banks—European waters were over-exploited. The world was in the midst of a minor ice age. Canada's indigenous peoples used furs, and the Europeans followed suit. According to Dr. Dickason, the Europeans came to a new world in search of resources. They could never have stayed without the resources of the country's indigenous peoples.

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The monetary value of what the first nations contributed to the opening of Canada's interior, "what to Europeans was a formidable and featureless country," can never really be calculated, said Dr. Dickason. A quotation from Jesuit writings, "the horror of this forest," illustrates how intimidating this country was found to be by the Europeans. There were no landmarks, there was no way of distinguishing one tree from another, to the European eye. But "the Indians had a very clear eye for extremely fine detail," said Dr. Dickason, "for instance, different qualities of snow, different sides of trees being a bit different—showing prevailing weather;" all this was evident to the indigenous peoples.

There was no penetration of the interior without Indian guides. The Indians had geographical knowledge, it was not just "an innate instinct," said Dr. Dickason, "the Indians had learned how to get around." Today, we are still using their navigational techniques and equipment. We are still using the canoe in the form designed and built by the first nations, and we are still using the toboggan.

The English language as spoken in Canada today has incorporated many Indian words—*canoe, dory, shark, kayak, hammock, chinook, hurricane, shack, peewee,* and *caucus* are all examples. *Caribou, jaguar, condor, opossum, cocoa, sassafras, tomato, potato,* and *tapioca* are all borrowed from Indian words.

"Canada's indigenous people were first-rate farmers, and their plant expertise far exceeded Europeans' at the time," said Dr. Dickason. "They were extremely knowledgeable in two areas pertaining

to plants—agriculture and pharmacology. Their contribution is immeasurable; two thirds of the food crops of the world are of Indian origin."

Farming in the Americas concentrated on plants rather than animals. According to Dr. Dickason, it is not known exactly when plant domestication first began, but there were farming communities all over the Americas before the Europeans arrived. The first cultivated crops date from about 7000 B.C.

Corn, beans and squash were the "big three." When planted together, these three contributed to the health of each other, fertilized the ground themselves, helped to keep insects away, and helped to maintain a nutritionally enriched diet. "Corn does not propagate itself. If corn wasn't cultivated, it would disappear in one generation," said Dr. Dickason. "It took the Indians 1000 years of selective breeding to get corn to the state it was when the Europeans came." First adopted by the Europeans as animal food, it now used for human consumption and in a wide range of industrial applications. "It is said that corn was a far greater treasure than all the gold and silver that the Europeans looted from the New World," remarked Dr. Dickason. "The impact of the Americas and of agriculture was profound." Of the four foods of the world—wheat, rice, corn and potatoes—two are from Amer-Indian societies.

Pharmacology is another area in which aboriginal societies were highly skilled, and had much to teach the

Europeans. According to Dr. Dickason, every drug that has originated in the Americas was in use when the Europeans got here. Quinine, for example, greatly reduced malaria, and cocaine, which was first used as an anaesthetic, was used by Peruvians in trepanning operations. "All Indians knew how to cure diseases, and were extremely skilled bone-setters," Dr. Dickason said, "all Indians were physicians." When Cartier's men were threatened by scurvy, the Indians gave them a concoction derived from a variety of spruce, high in Vitamin "C." The prairie turnip was also used a source of Vitamin "C" by aboriginal peoples. The Inuit used the vegetarian contents of animal stomachs for the same purpose.

The Indians taught the Europeans how to survive in this country, but that's not all. They also knew how to have fun. "Indians all over the two continents played various forms of a ball game," said Dr. Dickason. "Sports were not secularized; they were very ritualistic. You played games to find out what was going on on the other side. Soccer rules are very close to Indian ball games. Ball courts were created, round or rectangular, and ball games were played on ice."

According to Dr. Dickason, hockey originated with the Indians. Although I've been a little slow to adopt this tradition, I'm quite certain that the Stanley Cup play-off game will be broadcast at my house tonight, and that thousands of people all across the country will be glued to the set, appreciating every moment! While I may not share the popular enthusiasm for this particular contribution, Dr. Dickason did help me appreciate the tremendous effect the aboriginal peoples have had on the shape of our culture. Our aboriginal heritage is evident in every facet of our society, and for that, I am grateful.