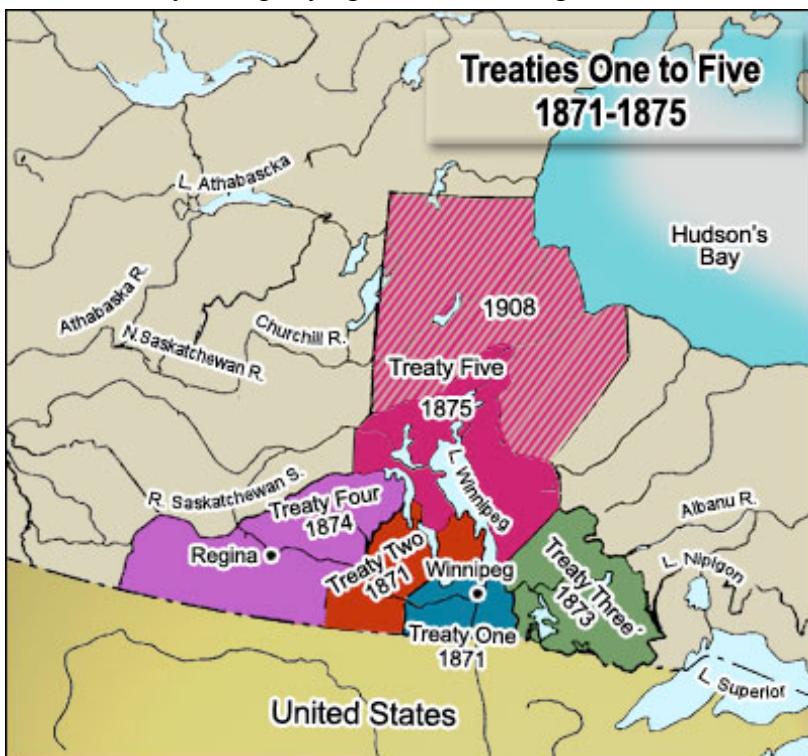


Background to the Numbered Treaties

When Canada became a country in 1867, it was much smaller than it is today and did not include any territory west of Ontario. Canada consisted of four provinces, all of which had previously been colonies of Great Britain: Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario. Soon after Confederation, many Canadians looked west to the Prairies where they hoped the land would be opened up for farming and settlement.

Rather than negotiate with the Aboriginal peoples living on the Prairies, the first thing the Canadian government did to gain access to the land was to meet and negotiate with the owners of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). The King of England had given the HBC the exclusive rights to trade in Rupert's Land in 1670. Rupert's Land extended as far west as the Rocky Mountains, and included all the land whose lakes and rivers drained into the Hudson's Bay. In 1870, the Hudson's Bay Company agreed to sell the government of Canada its rights to Rupert's Land for £300,000 in addition to keeping several land grants in the territory.⁸



£300,000 in addition to keeping several land grants in the territory.⁸

Did the Hudson's Bay Company have the right to sell its claim to Rupert's Land to the Canadian government? Was the HBC the rightful owner of it? One scholar compares the Hudson's Bay Company's control of Rupert's Land to "Pepsi Cola or another such company gaining title to the lands of another country merely by engaging in trading."⁹

Map of Treaties One to Five:
<http://www.canadiana.org/citm/imagepopups/nt1>

After making this deal with the Hudson's Bay Company, the Canadian government decided that it had to extinguish Aboriginal rights to land in this territory. From 1871-1877 the Canadian government negotiated seven different treaties that became known as the "Numbered Treaties."

⁸ J.M. Bumsted, *A History of the Canadian Peoples, Third Edition* (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 224.

⁹ Sharon H. Venne, "Understanding Treaty 6: An Indigenous Perspective," in Michael Asch, ed. *Aboriginal and Treaty Rights in Canada: Essays on Law, Equality, and Respect for Difference* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997, 2002), p. 184.

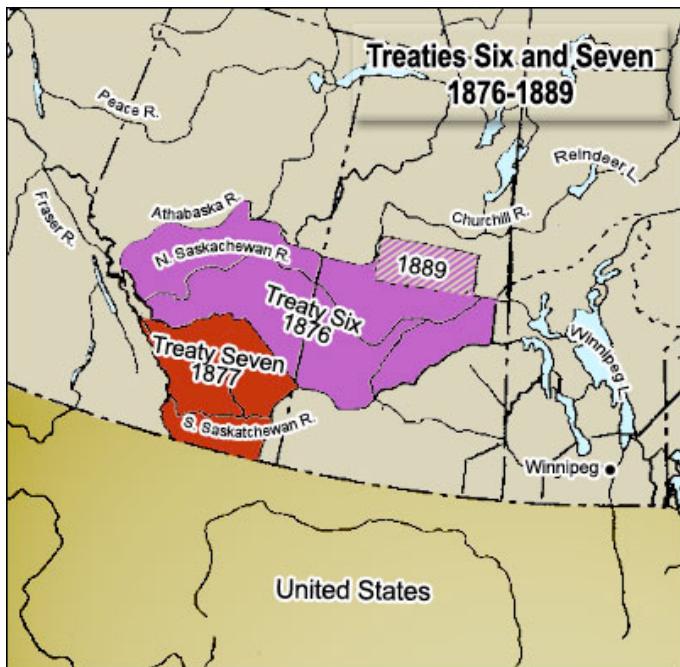
The Numbered Treaties were intended to extinguish Aboriginal title to lands that ran from western Ontario to the Rocky Mountains.

The Canadian government and Indigenous people had different reasons to sign the treaties. The Canadian government wanted to gain sovereignty, or control, over this territory, so it could populate the Prairies with Canadian settlers. Some Indigenous people thought they were creating an alliance that would be renewed each year.¹⁰ Buffalo herds were in serious decline because they had been overhunted by Native and white hunters. Indigenous people depended on large buffalo herds for their food, clothing and shelter and were becoming increasingly worried that their main food source was running out. As a result, Aboriginal leaders wanted to switch to farming to grow their food and they insisted that the treaties include farm education, tools, and animals.¹¹

Historians wonder whether Native leaders had much choice in signing the Numbered Treaties. There were already pressures on their way of life because Canadian settlers were starting to move

west, and the buffalo were disappearing. For many Aboriginal peoples signing the treaties was a way of ensuring their survival—if they could not depend on hunting they could make a living by farming.

Not all Indigenous people wished to sign the treaties, however. When Poundmaker, an influential Cree man, heard that each family would receive 640 acres, he said, “This is our land, it isn’t a piece of pemmican to be cut off and given in little pieces back to us. It is ours and we will take what we want.”¹²



Map of Treaties Six and Seven:
http://www.canadiana.org/citm/imagepopups/nt6-7_e.html

The signing of the treaties led to some long-lasting grievances. The Canadian government believed that it had bought the land with the treaties. Through the treaties, Indigenous people lost their sovereignty over their lands although some Native people believed they had not sold the land to the Canadian government, but had merely allowed Canadians to live and farm on it in exchange for payments. The treaties were followed by Canadian laws that further regulated how Aboriginal people would be educated, where they could live and where they could work.¹³

¹⁰ Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), pp. 147-149.

¹¹ See the text of Treaty 6.

¹² Peter Erasmus, as told to Henry Thomson, *Buffalo Days and Nights*, (Calgary : Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 1976), p. 244.

¹³ Venne, “Understanding Treaty 6,” 192, 195; Friesen, *Canadian Prairies*, pp. 147-149.