

Plains Indigenous Peoples and the Shaping of Nineteenth-Century Canada-U.S. Relations

Michel Hogue, Carleton University

Among historians, it has become increasingly commonplace to acknowledge the critical role that indigenous peoples played in shaping events along the shifting Mexico-U.S. border and in influencing relations between the two countries. Is the same true along the northwestern border of the United States? Were the actions of the indigenous peoples of the northern plains as formative in structuring relations between the United States and Canada?

This paper will explore these questions by focusing on those instances across the nineteenth century in which the international boundary along the forty-ninth parallel emerged as a flashpoint in the relations between indigenous peoples and federal or imperial authorities. It will show how the conflicts involving different indigenous nations became mapped onto national disputes between the United States and Canada, as these nations sought to clarify the boundaries of their territorial claims across the plains. In this way, the conflicts on the distant edges of national territories found their way to the center of discussions about nation-making. At the same time, this paper suggests that such contests boosted the national aspirations of different indigenous actors. In their attempt to carve out autonomous spaces for the maintenance of their ways of life, the overlapping imperial and national claims created openings for the advancement of indigenous economic and political goals.