

Calling Badger and the Symbols of the Spirit Language: The Cree Origins of the Syllabic System

Winona Stevenson

Nêhiyawak, *Cree people*, were the first, and for a long time the only Indigenous peoples in present-day Western Canada with a written language. Composed of syllabic characters, the written form of nêhiyawêwin, the *Cree language*, can be found throughout Cree territory from Northern Quebec to Northeast British Columbia, and south to Montana. Cree syllabics arrived among the people in the early 1800s and were used extensively until quite recently. Over time, as the English language replaced the daily usage of Cree, the Cree syllabary fell into disuse. Today only a handful of Cree speakers still know and use it, though in the last decade or so, interest in reviving and utilizing Cree syllabics has grown tremendously.

The origins of the Cree syllabary has long been credited to the ingenuity of the Rev. James Evans of the Wesleyan Methodist church. According to missionary records and other non-Indian documented accounts, Evans arrived among the muskego-winiwak, *Swampy Cree People*, of Norway House in August of 1840 and by mid-November printed three hundred copies of the hymn "Jesus my all to Heaven has Gone" in Cree syllabics.¹ A remarkable feat for anyone who had only been among Cree people a few short months and who continued relying on interpreters for the duration of his time in Cree country. According to his biographer and other historical records, Evans' accomplishment, "upon which his enduring fame rests" was made possible by his fluency in the Ojibway language which allowed him to "master Cree easy" and also by the

1. Bruce Peel, "How the Bible Came to the Cree," *Alberta Historical Review* 6, 2 (1958), 15, 16.

assistance of Chief Factor Donald Ross of the Hudson's Bay Company and his Native wife.²

This great Canadian myth has endured for over 160 years virtually unchallenged. Few question colonialist/conqueror renditions of the past and even fewer bothered asking Cree people directly about the origins of their writing system. A handful of anthropologists are aware that an Indigenous version exists in Cree oral histories but most, like David Mandelbaum, choose to disregard it in favor of the James Evans story.³

Mandelbaum recorded the origin story of the Cree syllabary from old Chief Fine Day of the Sweetgrass First Nation in the 1930s. According to Fine Day, a Wood Cree named Badger Call⁴ died and returned to life with the gift of writing from the Spirit World.⁵ Old Fine Day's grandson Wes Fineday told the story in more detail some time ago on the CBC radio program Morningside. Fineday the younger explained that Calling Badger came from the Stanley Mission area and lived ten to fifteen years before his grandfather's birth in 1846. On his way to a sacred society meeting one evening Calling Badger and two singers came upon a bright light and all three fell to the ground. Out of the light came a voice speaking Calling Badger's name. Soon after, Calling Badger fell ill and the people heard he had passed away. During his wake three days later, while preparing to roll him in buffalo robes for the funeral, the people discovered that his body was not stiff like a dead person's body should be. Against all customs and tradition the people agreed to the widow's request to let the body sit one more night. The next day Calling Badger's body was still not stiff so the old people began rubbing his back and chest. Soon his eyes opened and he told the people he had gone to the Fourth World, the spirit world, and there the spirits taught him many things. Calling Badger told the people of the things he was shown that prophesized events in the future, then he pulled out some pieces of birch bark with symbols on them. These symbols, he told the

-
2. John McLean, *James Evans: Inventor of the Syllabic System of the Cree Language* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1890), 163.
 3. David Mandelbaum, *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical, and Comparative Study* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1987 reprint), 180.
 4. Badger Call is also referred to as 'Calling Badger' and 'Badger Voice' or Mistanâkôwêw.
 5. Fine Day explained that he learned the syllabary from Strikes-him-on-the-back who learned it directly from Badger Call. Mandelbaum, *The Plains Cree*, 180.

people, were to be used to write down the spirit languages, and for the Cree people to use to communicate among themselves.⁶

A few decades after David Mandelbaum's visit among the Plains Cree of Saskatchewan, anthropologist Verne Dusenbury was doing fieldwork among the Plains Cree on the Rocky Boy reservation in Montana. He was told a similar story by Raining Bird in December of 1959. According to Raining Bird "the spirits came to one good man and gave him some songs. When he mastered them, they taught him how to make a type of ink and then showed him how to write on white birch bark."⁷ He also received many teachings about the spirits which he recorded in a birch bark book. When the one good man returned to his people he taught them how to read and write. "The Cree were very pleased with their new accomplishment, for by now the white men were in this country. The Cree knew that the white traders could read and write, so now they felt that they too were able to communicate among themselves just as well as did their white neighbors."⁸

In all the oral accounts of the origins of the Cree syllabary it was told that the missionaries learned Cree syllabics from the Cree. In the Fineday account Badger Call was told by the spirits that the missionaries would change the script and claim that the writing belonged to them. In the Raining Bird account the birch bark book with the teachings and Cree syllabary was stolen and taught to the missionaries who disregarded the spirit teachings, took the syllabary and claimed they invented it.

What we have here are two conflicting accounts of the origins of the Cree syllabic system, one found in Cree oral traditions that has long been disregarded, the other documented in primary sources and touted as the official version. The primary reasons why the Evans version prevails are first, because it supports colonialist discourse – Europeans were/are superior to Nehiyawak. Church historian Bruce Peel feeds into this discourse by ostentatiously proclaiming that "Evans used symbols to represent syllables and produced a script so simple that any unlettered Indian could master it within days."⁹ The second reason why the Evans

6. Wes Fineday, "The Story of Calling Badger," CBC radio, Morningside (n.d.)

7. Verne Dusenbury, *The Montana Cree: A Study in Religious Persistence* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998 reprint), 267.

8. *Ibid.*, 268.

9. Peel, "How the Bible," 15.

version prevails is because very little serious attention has been paid to the version stored in Cree oral traditions.

Anthropologist Verne Dunsenbery is one of the few scholars who challenged the Evans' version in favor of the Cree. Before completely disregarding the Cree account, he implores, two factors should be considered:

*In the first place, the writing does not look like anything a white man, and especially an Englishman, would invent. In the second place, an interesting speculation arises concerning the possibility that the Cree might have developed their own written form – much as Sequoia did for the Cherokee – by what Kroeber calls 'stimulus diffusion.'*¹⁰

All other missionaries before Evans used the Roman alphabet to reduce Indigenous languages to written form. The Cree syllabary is unique in that it consists of a series of triangles, angles, and hooks of various configurations each of which are mirrored in four directions. Each symbol depicts syllables rather than individual sounds, and to these are added a number of accent characters that represent terminal consonents and vowels.

Figure 2
Plains Cree Syllabary

▽	e	△	i	▽	o	△	a	▽	â
▽◦	we	△◦	wi	▽◦	wo	△◦	wa	▽◦	wâ
∨	pe	∧	pi	∨	po	∧	pa	∨	pâ
U	te	∩	ti	U	to	∩	ta	U	tâ
q	ke	ρ	ki	q	ko	ρ	ka	q	kâ
γ	ce	∩	ci	γ	co	∩	ca	γ	câ
γ	me	∩	mi	γ	mo	∩	ma	γ	mâ
ϑ	ne	ρ	ni	ϑ	no	ρ	na	ϑ	nâ
γ	se	∩	si	γ	so	∩	sa	γ	sâ
4	ye	∩	yi	4	yo	∩	ya	4	yâ
		.	w	◦	m	◦	w		
		·	p	◦	n	◦	l		
		/	t	◦	s	◦	r		
		\	k	+	y	=	h		
		-	c			x	hk		

10. Dunsenbury, *The Montana Cree*, 271.

Sequoyah's Cherokee alphabet has received far more serious attention as an Indigenous invention, but unlike the Cree syllabary, no competing claims to its invention threaten its Indigenous origins because it was so well recorded in its making.¹¹ The Cherokee had already experienced considerable interaction with European colonists and by the 1820s, when Sequoyah developed the syllabary, the Cherokee not only had direct knowledge of writing and its utility, but many were literate in English.

According to Raymond Fogelson, Sequoyah's idea to create a writing system was definitely influenced by his contacts with Euroamericans, but it may have also been influenced by old petroglyphs found throughout Cherokee territory.¹² After years of experimentation and study, Sequoyah eventually translated the Cherokee language into eighty-five "minimal sound units, to each of which he attached a particular symbol." While many of the symbols derive from the English alphabet none has the same corresponding sound value as in English and all denote syllables rather than letter sounds.¹³ By the early 1820s the significance of the Cherokee syllabary was recognized, in 1828 the first issue of a bilingual newspaper the *Cherokee Phoenix* rolled off the Cherokee Nation press, and by 1830 most Cherokee people could read and write in their own language.¹⁴ Missionaries were quick to recognize "the advantages of the syllabary over the awkward orthography they had tried to impose on the Cherokee language" and so among the earliest publications were the Bible and other religious tracts which were translated, typeset, and printed by the American Board of Foreign Missions.¹⁵

Like the Cherokee, the Cree also had upwards of two centuries of contact with Europeans, vis-à-vis the fur trade, and were well aware of the power of the written word. Unlike the Cherokee experience, however, Cree people had little or no chance to learn how to read and write because prior to Evans arriving in Norway House the only schools in Rupert's Land were

-
11. Sequoyah's English name was George Guess. See Raymond D. Fogelson, "Sequoyah c.1770-1843 Inventor of the Cherokee syllabary," pp. 580-582 in Frederick E. Hoxie, ed., *Encyclopedia of North American Indians* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996); Rayna Green, "Sequoyah," pp. 146-147 in *The British Museum Encyclopedia of Native North America*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
 12. Fogelson, "Sequoyah," 580.
 13. *Ibid.*; Dusenbury, *The Montana Cree*, 271.
 14. *Ibid.*, 581; Green, "Sequoyah," 146.
 15. Fogelson, "Sequoyah," 581.

located in the Red River settlement.¹⁶ Also like the Cherokee, age-old petroglyphs abound in Cree territory, especially in the Canadian Shield area around Stanley Mission.

Given the circumstances in Cree country in the 1840s – long familiarity with the written word, age-old petroglyph archetypes, and the fact that James Evans was only among Cree speakers a few short months which is far too brief a period to learn the language – Dusenbury's claim that "it does not seem too incredulous to believe that the Cree may have developed a written form of their own language" is convincing.¹⁷ Luckily, the Cherokee already knew how to read and write English and so were able to document the emergence of their own syllabary.

The 'official story' of the Cree syllabary has taken on a mythic quality in Canadian history. Like the 'Bering Strait' theory, the James Evans version of the origins of Cree syllabics has been propagated for so long, it has become 'fact' in Canadian minds. But it is only one version. The colonialist tendency to ignore or disbelieve the ability of Indigenous peoples to create remarkable engineering, scientific, and other intellectual accomplishments will continue until more challenges from Indigenous oral histories refute them.

16. See Winona Stevenson, "The Red River Indian Mission School and John West's 'Little Charges', 1829-1833," *Native Studies Review* 4, 1 & 2 (1988): 129-66.

17. Dusenbury, *The Montana Cree*, 271.