

Brian Gettler, *Colonialism's Currency: Money, State, and First Nations in Canada, 1820-1950*, Montréal, PQ, Kingston, ON: [McGill-Queen's University Press](#), 2020, xvii + 301pp., figures, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth; ISBN 9780228001171, \$120.00, Paper; ISBN 9780228001188, \$37.95.

Brian Gettler offers a remarkable history of Canadian colonialism in *Colonialism's Currency: Money, State, and First Nations in Canada, 1820-1950*. In addition to government legislation, land policies, a reserve system, and residential schooling, money “played an important role in the Canadian colonial project” (7). Gettler explores the ways that Canadian currency integrally shaped social relations, cultural encounters, and power dynamics in Canada’s colonization of Indigenous territories from the early 19th to the mid-20th centuries. The author prompts readers to consider the material and monetary strata of colonial power and state expansion by focusing on three case studies of money among First Nations in the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region, Western James Bay and within the Wendake community near Québec City. Within these changing “currency spaces,” money served usefully to represent value and facilitate economic exchanges. But, in its various forms, whether in earlier private-issued company money, or later state-issued coin or bills, money also functioned to establish social relations and mediate power within Indigenous communities and their relationship with the colonial state.

Canadian governments in the Province of Canada, and later the federal government after Confederation, gained informal and formal influence in Indigenous territories when their respective currencies began transplanting older forms of money that had joined Indigenous people with fur traders and early colonists. Given the scarcity of specie coin and *livre* and pound sterling currencies in Canada’s early settlements, it was necessary that alternative currencies gain circulation and convertibility in town economies and support resource extraction within Indigenous territories. In the fur trade era, business monopolies serving as proxies of Imperial governments asserted claims to vast geographic spaces in early Canada. The Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) claimed Rupert’s Land by its Crown charter; New France ceded rights to the Compagnie du Nord and realms leased in the King’s Domain in the Saguenay region. In these contexts, the representational value of the beaver pelt, whether in New France as the *castor* unit, or in British territories, as the “made beaver” (MB) unit (and sometimes circulating as beaver currency in coin tokens), became a useful unit of account to support trade, merchant activities and colonial town businesses. After 1821, when the HBC secured its complete monopoly of Rupert’s Land and after 1831, when it acquired the King’s Domain territories in Québec, the company’s MB unit had convertibility both within settlements and across Indigenous territories. As a unit of account, the MB conveniently moved trade beyond straight barter to allow for gift, credit, and debit transactions. But the MB unit also locked Indigenous trappers into trading relationships with the company issuing it. Indeed, those holding MB coin tokens had to redeem them at specific HBC posts.

In the 19th century, settlement colonists moved north into the Saguenay valley and the Lower Canadian state awarded a massive timber monopoly to William Price, whose company issued its own private money in one-pound currency bills. The book draws attention to the implications of

older private money regimes and their circulation in areas of colonial contest, especially as settlement increased and private bank-issued currency from Lower Canada began to circulate within them. Indeed, over the same region in Quebec, various forms of early money could compete with each other before the Canadian currency triumphed over all. In the Chicoutemi region by 1860, for instance, Gettler sees fur trade accounts showing sterling transactions and church tithes paid by Montagnais in cash clearly indicating a watershed moment when, in that area, the HBC had lost its power in the region.

Indigenous people welcomed Canadian money in the trade. HBC competitors moving into northern territories in the late 19th century often offered cash rather than goods in kind for furs. As settlement increased in colonized tracts and around trading posts, private transport companies offered cash-earning wage employment. Larger settler populations circulated more Canadian dollars. Cash paid in trade or in wage employment allowed Indigenous people to use to their benefit these convertible dollars at other posts, at colonial stores or among the HBC's own competitors. But greater Canadian currency in circulation also hastened changes in intercultural relations and ultimately undermined Indigenous autonomy. The government paid treaty annuities in Canadian dollars. Indigenous people accepting them entered into relationships with the Crown with the promise of continuing their traditional lives. But treaties also allowed the state to open territories to resource extraction and colonization, undermining traditional subsistence economies and making wage-earning employment and/or government relief a necessity. In the Victorian era, Canadian money flowed in land, resource and wage transactions to support liberalism, thus undermining collectivist band solidarity. It substantiated the state's presence in the very imperial symbolism appearing on paper currency, and affirmed the state's claim to territories remote from actual colonial seats of power. Moreover, as Canadian money gained circulation it provided a means for greater government surveillance and control of Indigenous people. An ongoing racial and cultural assumption made by colonial and federal governments was that Indigenous people were inherently improvident in handling money. Assuming that Indigenous people did not understand money and that they could not use it wisely, governments in treaty areas consistently sought to limit money's circulation among Indigenous people. Governments only reluctantly paid annuities with cash instead of goods in kind. Indian agencies taking up work in treaty areas paid relief not in cash, but in goods. Government officials tended to hold band members' money in trust for agents to oversee how it was spent and undercut the authority of chiefs in traditions of wealth redistribution. In the 20th century, agents continued to withhold veteran and soldier widow benefits, or paid them only with goods in kind. Canadian currency, then became symbolic of government power in treaty areas, where it served as a means of greater Indigenous surveillance and control. By focusing on the history of money and its circulation in Canadian history, Gettler offers significant new ways to understand state making, power and colonialism in Canada.

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