

CHAPTER 2

SETTING THE STAGE

Indian First Nations

For thousands of years prior to European exploration and colonization, North America was inhabited by many different indigenous peoples organized into political entities and groupings based on common languages and cultural traditions. Along the eastern seaboard alone, explorers encountered dozens of distinct peoples.

At that time, the term normally used in Europe to describe people speaking the same language and having the same cultural traditions was 'nation'; hence there could be many national groups living in one state. When Europeans encountered the different North American peoples it was natural to apply the term in common use in Europe at the time; they described these separate peoples as 'nations'. Thus the Royal Proclamation of 1763 refers to "the several Nations or Tribes of Indians with whom We are connected".

In recent years indigenous peoples have given new expression to their distinctiveness and their origins. Names have assumed a special significance. *Eskimo* and *Indian* (a term that arose because the earliest explorers mistakenly thought they had reached India) are perceived as European terms. Inuit have asked that they be called what they call themselves—*Inuit*—meaning simply, *the People*. In less than two decades the term has come into general use.

The peoples of Canada now known as 'Indians' face a different situation. Inuit speak more or less one language, so they were able to take an indigenous word that has meaning for all Inuit. The Indian peoples of Canada, however, speak dozens of distinctly different languages; their common languages are English and French. Indian peoples in Canada have thus extracted from history an English term that had been used in the Royal Proclamation, in treaties and in major legal decisions in the United States—the word 'nation'. Together they refer to themselves as 'First Nations', a term with historical and political significance.