



Remarks at the Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indian Edward Marsden (1895)

Edward Marsden belonged to the indigenous Tsimshian nation, whose historic homeland is now located within British Columbia. He grew up in a village founded by Tsimshian Christians under the leadership of a white Anglican missionary named William Duncan. In the 1880s, Duncan broke with the Church of England and led his Tsimshian followers—the teenaged Marsden among them—out of British Columbia to Annette Island, in the Alaska panhandle, where they built an industrialized settlement. Marsden subsequently attended college in Ohio and became a Presbyterian minister.

Marsden delivered the remarks excerpted here during his college years. He was speaking in upstate New York to the Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indian, an annual meeting of social reformers, overwhelmingly white and Protestant, who lobbied the US government to abolish reservations and assimilate indigenous Americans into US society. Marsden recounts for the conference how his Tsimshian community swore allegiance to the United States after settling on Annette Island. On that occasion, William Duncan had just returned from a trip to Washington DC to persuade the US government to grant his followers a reservation on Annette Island; accompanying Duncan was US commissioner of education Nathaniel H. R. Dawson, who was touring Alaska to inspect the public schools. After recounting that story, Marsden offers his ideas for how to Americanize and Christianize indigenous peoples.

In 1887, we left the region of country formerly occupied by us and came into Alaska for the sake of freedom and an opportunity to worship God according to the dictates of conscience. [...] The first thing that we did was to take the oath of allegiance to the United States government. The 7th of August is our Fourth of July. [...] On the 7th of August, a ship came from the south, bringing Mr. Duncan and many American passengers. He told us to put up a flagstaff. We did and gathered around it. In a few words, he told us of his work in the United States and of your sympathy. He was followed by Mr. Dawson, the Commissioner of Education. He was patriotic in his speech; and I can remember how our people cheered, and, though it was in Alaska, the thermometer of the race went up to two or three hundred degrees. A new spirit was put into our people. Then the stars and stripes were unfolded and were slowly drawn to the top of the mast. The flag was given us by friends in Philadelphia. It was one that had been used in the Independence Hall of that city. While it was going up, Mr. Duncan said: “Stars and stripes—stars for the friends, stripes for the enemies. Wherever this flag floats, the powerful arm of the American government can reach those under that flag.” Then we all joined in three tremendous cheers to the flag.

Thus our exodus was made in 1887. The great principles that we contended for were like those of the Pilgrim Fathers, who left their homes in England and came to this side of the ocean for the sake of liberty and freedom to worship God according to the dictates of their consciences. So we left our old homes, our church, our hall, our industrial establishments, and began life in a new place; but the things that we gathered together were not enough to protect us. A number of us had to live in tents in an Alaska winter. We had to endure a great deal of hardship. But in spite of all these things, we have been very proud to be American citizens. When, in May 1894, I stood in Marietta, Ohio, and took my final oath of allegiance to support the Constitution of the United

States and stand by the laws of the country and, if necessary, to protect the Constitution under the flag, I was proud to be an American.

This, then, is the way my people came to be in the United States of America. I have been requested, since I belong to the full-blooded sons of America, to give to you what I consider the things that would help to solve the Indian problem. [...]

How do you solve the heathen problem? [...] The only way by which you can reach those who are below you is to take hold of them and pull them up. The majority of the heathen are way down. You cannot reach them unless you go down where they are. Take hold of them there, but do not yourself lose the Christian principles that you have received. Take hold of the principles with one hand, and hold [*haul?*] the heathen up with the other. “Compel them to come in,” the Bible says. [...]

Let me distinguish here between education and Christianity. Christianize the adult heathen first, and then afterward educate them. With the children, do the reverse: educate them first, and then Christianize them. [...]

Give them industries, the kind that will lift them up. I am proud of being a steamboat engineer and that I can also turn my hand to many difficult [*different?*] things; for I have some knowledge of eighteen different trades. Give my people, then, industries.

Give them pure social enjoyment.

Give them law. [...] The government of the United States is for the people, of the people, and by the people. But the people is made up of individuals. Each one must learn to be self-governed. Let the teachers teach the Constitution of the United States and that the laws of the United States must be obeyed. But when I have the law in myself, I am much better protected than when Congress passes special laws to protect me. Make them, then, self-governing. The simple knowledge of the laws of the United States would help a great deal in keeping our Indians orderly and industrious.

Source: Isabel C. Barrows, ed., *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual Meeting of the Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indian, 1895* (N.p.: Lake Mohonk Conference, 1896), 64-66, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/inu.30000011405515>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

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These edited excerpts from Marsden’s address are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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