CANADA'S SESQUICENTENNIAL: REVISITING CONFEDERATION

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ABSTRACT

As the countdown to 2017 begins, educators across the nation are given the occasion to explore both the historiography and pedagogy associated with teaching the narrative behind Canada's inception. For decades history textbooks and curricula have omitted an integral part of the story of Canadian confederation: the role of the Numbered Treaties. As the new nation expanded west after 1867, it was these agreements with the First Nations to share the land that allowed the Canadian government to expand west with relatively little violence. Leading up to Canada's sesquicentennial year, we have the opportunity to not only explore our nation's evolution, but to expand their students' historical thinking by asking *whose voice has been left out and why?*

As the countdown to 2017 begins, Canadians from coast to coast will be reminded that the country will be marking its 150th year of nationhood on July 1st. Undoubtedly, there will be a concerted media focus, with official messages, activities and events, as well as television, print, and Internet ads from all levels of government. As was the case on Canada's centenary in 1967, school children across the country will be given the opportunity to raise their consciousness about Canadian history and Canadian nationalism. 2017 will offer history teachers and curriculum developers, such as me, the occasion to look inward and outward using both a historiographical and pedagogical lens. We should take the commemoration as a time to reflect: whose perspective has been omitted from the Canadian narrative and how can we work to include it in our teaching practice? In what ways can we ensure that our students are imbued with the historical thinking skills necessary to ask *whose voice is absent?*

1967: A LAMENT FOR CONFEDERATION

To mark Canada's centennial, Chief Dan George, noted chief of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation, offered an elegy for Canada's First Nations' peoples in a speech at the Empire Stadium in Vancouver:

> *"Today, when you celebrate your hundred years, oh Canada, I am sad for all the Indian people throughout the land."*[1]

Standing in front of 32,000 people in Vancouver in 1967, Chief Dan George's *Lament for Confederation* challenged how history was taught across Canada:

> *"My nation was ignored in your history textbooks – they were little more important in the history of Canada than the buffalo that ranged the plains."*[2]

So, where do we stand today, almost 50 years after Chief Dan George's speech? How is First Nations history – notably, the First Nations' role in the creation and development of Canada – approached in classrooms across the nation?

1867: CONFEDERATION – A JOINING TOGETHER

THE EVENTS THAT LED TO CONFEDERATION

The first decade of my history teaching career found me teaching grade 9 social studies (alongside Canadian and American history, geography, Western Civilization, and world issues at the secondary school level); a primarily civics-based course with a smattering of Canadian history and geography. The curriculum's accompanying textbook, aimed at a 14-year-old audience, defined *confederation* as "a joining together," and went on to explain how George Brown, John A. Macdonald, and George-Étienne Cartier overcame their personal, cultural, and professional differences, as well as years of political deadlock, and joined forces in 1864 in a coalition government. After conferences in Charlottetown and Quebec, these "Fathers of Confederation" laid the footing for the new nation. This groundwork was reflected in the passing of the British North America Act on July 1st, 1867, Canada's constitutional birth certificate.

The ensuing chapters gave coverage to discontent in Nova Scotia and the Métis "rebellions" in the west, as well as post-Confederation legislation like Macdonald's National Policy.

While my intention is not to disparage the textbook (as a matter of fact, I much liked its layout and design, especially the manner in which it effortlessly incorporated literacy-building and reading comprehension exercises), it is to point out a major missing perspective: what was the role of the First Nations on the Prairies in Canadian confederation? Recall the historical thinking skill I mentioned above: *whose voice is absent?* Who *joined together* to create Canada?

THE EVOLUTION OF CANADA: 1867 – 1914

There is a legend in the west that the news of the Canadian government purchase of Rupert's Land in 1869 reached what is now the province of Manitoba a short while later when Louis Riel and his friends were hunting south of present-day Winnipeg and saw federal government Dominion Land surveyors. With a moccassined foot, Riel stopped the surveyors, and the subsequent Red River Resistance saw Manitoba (the "Postage Stamp" province) join Confederation in May of 1870.

The British North America Act (1867) and the Manitoba Act are foundational documents in the creation and evolution of Canada. Canadian history students explore these, as well as a raft of other pre-1914 events that saw Canada grow from four provinces to a dominion stretching from the Atlantic, to the Pacific, to the Arctic. A current Canadian history textbook or curriculum tour of this period would see a number of pivotal events in the evolution of Canada: the Dominion Lands Act, the creation of the Northwest Mounted Police, the Northwest Resistance, the Manitoba Schools Question, the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the Klondike Gold Rush, to name of few.

TEACHING ABOUT CONFEDERATION

Over the past decade or so, curriculum writers and textbook publishers have mindfully added Aboriginal perspectives. In curricula, specific learning outcomes have been fortified with distinctive learning outcomes, which are meant for Aboriginal (or francophone) students

to enhance the development of their language, identity, culture. Terms like 'rebellion' and 'massacre'– laden with subjectivity – have been replaced by 'resistance' and 'battle,' and the word 'Indian' is used only in a legislative sense.

Nevertheless, it is my contention that Canadian students are still missing one fundamental part of the story concerning the creation of Canada: the Numbered Treaties – *all students*, not just First Nation. Rather than associating words like "cede" or "sale" with treaties, we need to approach them using terms such as "relationship" and "sharing." Treaties were, and remain, a fundamental part of the Canadian landscape.

THE NUMBERED TREATIES

PRE-CONFEDERATION

Prior to European colonization, the North American continent was populated by many nations of people with different languages, cultures, religions, ways of life and traditional territories. When First Nations met with each other they negotiated alliances that were mutually beneficial. These alliances established peaceful relationships among them which included trade, passage, peace and friendship, and other obligations and responsibilities.[3]

The process of making treaty was well-established in First Nations communities; they engaged in, and were adept at, the process long before Europeans came to the continent. Treaties were more than agreements recorded on paper; they were spiritual covenants between the treaty parties and the creator. As well, there was no expiry date on a treaty (and it was customary to renew the agreement year after year). Treaties were to last into perpetuity.

With the arrival of French fur traders and the Hudson's Bay Company, negotiations continued; with the Europeans adapting to First Nations requests and conditions.

The 5th Earl of Selkirk, Thomas Douglas, purchased an area of land around present-day Winnipeg in 1812 and moved a number of impoverished Scottish crofters to the area he called Assiniboia. Chief Peguis and his people, whose traditional territory the Selkirk Settlers now resided, created and presented a land-sharing treaty for the Europeans to endorse. This treaty outlined the Selkirk Setters' responsibility and the land they could use and live on.[4]

POST-CONFEDERATION TREATIES

Beginning in 1701, the British crown entered into treaties to encourage peaceful relations between First Nations and non-First Nation people. Over the next several centuries, treaties were negotiated and entered into to define, among other things, the respective rights of First Nation people and governments to use and enjoy lands that First Nations people traditionally occupied.[5]

After Confederation in 1867, the Dominion of Canada looked to the North-West Territories to expand and followed the precedent that had been set for treaty making. Between 1871 and 1921, eleven Numbered Treaties were negotiated between the crown and First Nations covering the territories from present-day Ontario to Alberta and portions of British Columbia and the Northwest Territories.

THE TREATY MAKING PROCESS

Both the Crown and First Nations peoples practiced their own customs in sanctioning the Treaties. The Crown had lawyers and government officials and the First Nations peoples had Chiefs, headmen, spiritual women, and Elder advisors and spiritual leaders. For First Nations peoples, it is customary to approve important matters through spiritual ceremonies. During the Treaty signing process, the First Nations peoples conducted spiritual ceremonies because they believed the Creator must be part of the arrangement in order for the Treaties to be validated.[6]

Treaties are about the future, First Nations leaders signed treaties with an everlasting relationship in mind. It was First Nations way in which they legislatively and spiritually joined Canada. Treaties were to last "*As long as the sun shines, the grass grows, and the rivers flow*."

Jamie Wilson, commissioner for the Winnipeg-based Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba, told a Thompson, Manitoba Chamber of Commerce gathering in 2013 that treaties between the Crown and Canada's First Nations "have more to do with the future than they have to do with the past."[7]

TREATIES: THEIR ROLE IN CONFEDERATION

Both parties to the treaty-making process benefited from the Numbered Treaties. The Canadian government benefits included:

- peaceful access to lands for settlement, farming, railways, and development;
- peaceful settlement in the west;
- minimal costs for westward expansion and prevention of costly wars with the First Nations peoples; and
- protection for western lands by creating a barrier to American expansion.

These benefits became a reality as the Crown settled the land from sea to sea, eventually building the nation now known as Canada.

As a treaty settlement, First Nations peoples believed they were receiving:

- physical survival of their nations;
- peaceful relations through ongoing equitable relations;
- respect for cultural and spiritual survival as distinct nations by the preservation of their distinctive traditions and institutions; and
- a transition to a new lifestyle by learning different technologies within education, economics, health and other benefits.[8]

The treaty relationship is an integral to the creation of Canada as is the BNA Act.

CONCLUSION

The map of Canada from 1867 onward is a map of treaties. It was the process of treaty-making that led to the land that we all share today. 2017, Canada's sesquicentennial, will allow all of us to revisit the history of our nation's confederation. It will give teachers an occasion to bring new perspectives and narratives to their lessons. They will have an opportunity to bridge the past with the present and make it meaningful for their students, for they are legacy of it.

I see 2017 not as a tipping point in the teaching of historical thinking, but rather a turning point. A point at which we can embrace and appreciate the contrasting historical and contemporary narratives associated with our nation's genesis. This broadened view will give our students the ability to see that the seeds of Canadian confederation were sown before the passing of the British North America Act in 1867, are evident in the post-Confederation treaties and continue to grow today, nurtured by all of Canada's people.

In words of educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire, "Looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they [leaners] are so that they can more wisely build the future."[9]

NOTES

1 "This Day in History: July 1, 1967." *Vancouver Sun*, July 1, 2013. Accessed August 5, 2014. http://www.vancouversun.com/This history July 1967/6876736/story.html.

2 "This Day in History: July 1, 1967." *Vancouver Sun*, July 1, 2013. Accessed August 5, 2014. http://www.vancouversun.com/This history July 1967/6876736/story.html.

3 "Treaties." Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba. January 1, 2014. Accessed August 12, 2014. http://www.trcm.ca/.

4 Friesen, Dr. Jean. Lecture, TRCM – Teacher Workshop from Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba, Winnipeg, October 13, 2011.

5 "Treaties." Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba. January 1, 2014. Accessed August 12, 2014. http://www.trcm.ca/.

6 "The Treaties." In *Treaty Essential Learnings: The Treaty Experience in Manitoba*. Winnipeg: All Nations Print, 2012.

7 Barker, John. "Treaty Commissioner Jamie Wilson Offers Chamber a Primer on Thinking about Urban Reserves." *Thompson Citizen*, January 1, 2013. Accessed August 13, 2014. http://www.thompsoncitizen.net/article/20130605/THOMPSON0101/306059990/-1/thompson/treaty-commissioner-jamie-wilson-offers-chamber-a-primer-on-thinking.

8 "The Treaties." In *Treaty Essential Learnings: The Treaty Experience in Manitoba*. Winnipeg: All Nations Print, 2012.

9 Freire, Paulo. 2000. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.