# THE BEGINNING OF AN ERA: REFLECTIONS ON THE #CANCELCANADADAY MOVEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO

NICOLE LEE & ASHLEY WILKINSON

Nicole Lee is a second-year Master of Science in Kinesiology student at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ont. She plans to complete her PhD in Health Sciences to further understand and explore the experiences of Indigenous peoples in Northwestern Ontario. As a person of First Nation descent, Nicole takes pride in learning and advocating for her own people. She is passionate about the health and wellbeing of all people, including the Indigenous population.

Ashley Wilkinson is a Health Sciences PhD student at the University of Northern British Columbia. She also holds a Master's degree in Health Sciences with a specialization in Indigenous & Northern Health from Lakehead University. She has three years of experience in health research related to community health and social issues for marginalized groups across diverse urban, rural and remote geographies. She is passionate about health equity, anti-racism and the health of Indigenous communities.

## INTRODUCTION: THE NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO CONTEXT

Northwestern Ontario is the largest region in Ontario, stretching from the north shore of Lake Superior, west to Manitoba, and north to Hudson Bay. The region is known for its breathtaking wilderness, including several provincial parks, and outdoor activities such as fishing, hunting, hiking and camping. In addition to urban centres which serve as hub communities for the north, such as Thunder Bay and Sault St. Marie, the region is home to several First Nations and reserve communities. Some of those closest to Thunder Bay include Fort William First Nation, Red Rock Indian Band and Pays Plat First Nation (Figure 1). Several First Nations and reserve communities are considered fly-in only, or are otherwise hard to access.

When looking at the region, it is important to consider how legislation impacted its development. In October 1763, the British government issued a document commonly referred to as the Royal Proclamation of 1763. The intention behind this

**FIGURE 1. ONTARIO FIRST NATIONS MAPS**




Source: Government of Ontario.
Available at: https://files.ontario.ca/pictures/firstnations_map.jpg

document was to provide guidelines for settlement of Indigenous land across North America. Specifically, the document aimed to control the pace of colonial expansion and maintain the commitments that the British had made to Indigenous Peoples during the Seven Years' War, and explicitly acknowledged Indigenous Peoples' rights to the land (Indigenous Foundations, 2009). Future legislation did not acknowledge this. The Robinson-Superior Treaty and Robinson-Huron Treaties of 1850 provided access to the northern Great Lakes region for settlement, including a schedule of reserves, and guaranteed hunting and fishing rights. However, they also included ambiguous escalator clauses (Hele, 2020). This clause stated that if the Crown earned more than projected from the extraction of natural resources, it would increase annuity payments to the First Nations. But this was not obligatory. In 1892, An *Act to Amend the Act for the Protection of Game and Fur-Bearing Animals* was also passed by the Ontario legislature (Calverley, 2009). This Act set aside thousands of kilometres of land for the creation of game preserves and banned all hunting and trapping on this land. However, the creation of one such preserve — the Chapleau Game Preserve — prohibited members of the New Brunswick House Reserve in Treaty 9 territory from accessing their traditional hunting territories, prompting numerous complaints to Indian Affairs officials. These represent a few of the numerous examples of Indigenous rights being overlooked in favour of federal and provincial policy.

Of course, it would be a significant oversight not to discuss the *Indian Act* and the Residential School system in the context of the region. The *Indian Act*, enacted in 1876, is the primary legislation used by the federal government to administer almost every aspect of Indigenous Peoples' lives. It allows the government to control Indian status, land, resources and education, as well as outlining governmental obligations to Indigenous Peoples (Parrott, 2006). Following the implementation of the *Indian Act* in 1876, the federal government opened its first indus-

trial residential school in Battleford, Saskatchewan in 1883 (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, TRC, 2015a). Over the next several decades, the Residential School system expanded across the country, including several schools in Northwestern Ontario: Fort William Residential School, the Fort Frances School, Cecilia Jeffrey, and Shingwauk Indian Residential School (TRC, 2015a). The impacts of both the *Indian Act* and the Residential School system, including intergenerational trauma, disconnect from culture, familial instability and more continue to be felt by Indigenous Peoples in the region.

Overall, these examples represent some of the many ways that Indigenous Peoples in Northwestern Ontario have been abused and had their rights impeded by legislation. Needless to say, these examples provide the foundation for a complex relationship with the government and the concept of "Canada".

## #CANCELCANADADAY & INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE

On May 28, 2021 in Kamloops, British Columbia, the beginning of the world knowing the harsh reality Indigenous peoples of Canada have faced came to light. It began with the discovery of 215 presumed unmarked graves at the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School. As of June 9, 2022, 2,301 suspected unmarked graves were reported at former Residential School sites throughout Canada (Engels, 2021). In Ontario, there are 18 former Residential School locations, where currently 12 presumed unmarked burial sites have been found. However, more are expected (Engels, 2021). According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015b), 426 children were reported deceased while attending these residential schools, but there are an unknown number of children still missing.

In Northwestern Ontario, celebrations of Indigenous culture bring immense pride to Indigenous communities throughout the year. With the news regarding the Kamloops discovery coming just about a month before Canada Day, these celebrations were to be put on pause. This is where the "Cancel Canada Day" movement began. For many, it felt wrong to celebrate a country that had stolen the lives of so many children. Instead, it was proposed to honour the lives lost and reflect on what can be improved. The Indigenous resistance movement, Idle No More, called on Canadians to come together and "disrupt the celebration[s]" that traditionally mark Canada Day (Idle No More, n.d.). They stated "we will not celebrate stolen indigenous land and stolen indigenous lives. #Cancelcanadaday". This movement was to honour all lives lost to the Canadian state, including Indigenous lives; Black lives; Migrant lives; Women, Trans, and 2Spirit lives. Organizers asked Canadians to take part in banner drops, sit-ins and round dances as well as ceremony disruptions, marches and rallies (Idle No More, n.d.). This looked different across the country, but in Northern Ontario, many celebrations were cancelled or altered to create a day of honour, learning and reflecting on the truth of Canada's history. But what happened on July 2?

For most people, this was just another day; back to work, back to school, or getting ready for the long weekend. For Indigenous Peoples, this was another day of mourning, but without feeling the support from the rest of Canada. The #CancelCanadaDay movement gave Indigenous people the hope that Canada was standing behind them and that things

may begin to change. But for many Canadians, this was just a one-day movement — not unlike Indigenous Peoples' Day or Orange Shirt Day. Indigenous Peoples then began wondering about the point of the Cancel Canada Day movement if no initiative was going to be taken afterwards. Events like this highlight the need for continuous action towards reconciliation. There have been steps taken such as national holidays and acknowledgements made by the government, but these have only occurred after numerous requests from Indigenous Peoples. This is perhaps the most unfair aspect of what's happening; Indigenous Peoples should not be required to carry the burden of responsibility for reconciliation.

A second movement, Every Child Matters, started soon after the discoveries of so many presumed unmarked graves. There were orange flags across the country and Canadians wearing orange, which is still something seen today. This movement in particular included thousands of Canadians showing their support through a sea of orange, protests over the Residential Schools system, policies and violence (Millions, 2021). These events received a lot of media coverage and ended with the toppling of the 117-year-old statue of Queen Victoria at the Manitoba Legislature. In addition to its toppling, the statue was covered in red handprints and orange flags. Some media, however, then turned this and the idea of Every Child Matters into a controversy over the statue and how the toppling of it was "vandalism" and "violence" (Millions, 2021), perpetuating common stereotypes used against Indigenous Peoples (McCue, 2014). Unfortunately, this media coverage detracted from the real story, and many Canadians became focused on fixing the statue. This again demonstrated how hard it is for authority figures to engage in the hard truth behind Residential Schools, and how Indigenous resistance movements can be misrepresented and/or overlooked in the media.

In Northwestern Ontario, where the Indigenous population is very high, there are many places still sharing the message: Every Child Matters. This shows that Canada is slowly moving towards reconciliation with Indigenous people. However, it is difficult to know the extent to which the country's non-Indigenous population is starting to understand the harmful effects of the past and how these events continue to affect Indigenous Peoples in the present day. It is hoped that this does become the case, but there is still significant progress to be made.

## RECONCILING HISTORY & MOVING FORWARD

As the push towards reconciliation continues, it is important for Canada to understand that it will not happen overnight, and that is OK. Indigenous Peoples have been fighting this battle for generations and want others to be made aware in order to facilitate change. Instead of highlighting these issues on individual days through #CancelCanadaDay or Every Child Matters events, meaningful change must occur over time. It can begin within individuals making small changes, and being mindful of the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism every day. These small changes can include reading books on Residential Schools and reconciliation, supporting Indigenous artists, musicians and filmmakers, attending cultural events and being an ally. For someone who is not Indigenous, beginning to understand the ways of Indigenous Peoples and understanding the past can help begin the process of reconciling Canada's history and moving forward together.

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