Settler 'Response-Ability' *by Elaine Enns*

History, despite its wrenching pain,
cannot be unlived,
but if faced with courage,
need not be lived again.
– Maya Angelou, "On the Pulse of the Morning," 1993

Facing painful history is wrenching. In North America, settler descendants often avoid hard conversations about past and present relationships with Indigenous people. In my ethnic community, Mennonites in Saskatchewan, I have been exploring our resistances to "response-ability" through doctoral research, interviews, focus groups, and workshops. This piece summarizes two – selective memory and distortions in our communal narrative – which obscure the *whole* story and the truth that can lead to reconciliation.

Incomplete history

Mennonites tend to stress the importance of knowing their history. It is common for families to produce genealogical and popular history books (my family has no less than *seven*), but such narratives rarely include stories of Indigenous neighbours. "Among our constituency," admits Eileen Klassen Hamm, program director of Mennonite Central Committee Saskatchewan, "we see significant ignorance around Aboriginal issues, and a general acceptance of dominant society perspectives – for example, the prejudice that Native people are 'lazy' or have received too many public benefits. Even in congregations that are engaged in Indigenous issues there is ample evidence that our people simply do not know the story of colonization."

In several workshops with settler Mennonites I led a timeline exercise, in which we construct a parallel chronology: our migration stories on one line and Indigenous history on the other. Most participants knew their family and community's history, but could plot few events on the Indigenous line. "Aboriginal history was invisible in the family stories I learned," said one participant.

It is often controversial to break these silences. Another participant recounted how, as a high school student, he brought home a history book that celebrated Louis Riel. His father was offended at the "trash I was reading about the Riel 'outlaws,'" an antipathy he traced to his family's history of victimization in Russia. How many Mennonite immigrants unconsciously projected their fear of the rebels who destroyed their communities during the Russian Revolution onto Indigenous peoples when they arrived in Canada – not to mention onto Native land activists today?

Ignorance about Native realities, however, is a learned condition, which perpetuates dangerous fantasies about the past and prohibits authentic relationships in the present. For example, one person I interviewed said that "in the minds of most Mennonites, the prairies were vacant land, free and open; there was no recognition that it belonged to the First Nations." But this settler myth has a long and destructive legacy, dating back to the medieval Doctrine of Discovery's notion of *terra nullius*. Settler descendants need to understand that such presumptions of European entitlement *still* undergird our rationalizations for the conquest of "uninhabited" territories and colonization of "undeveloped" lands throughout the Americas.

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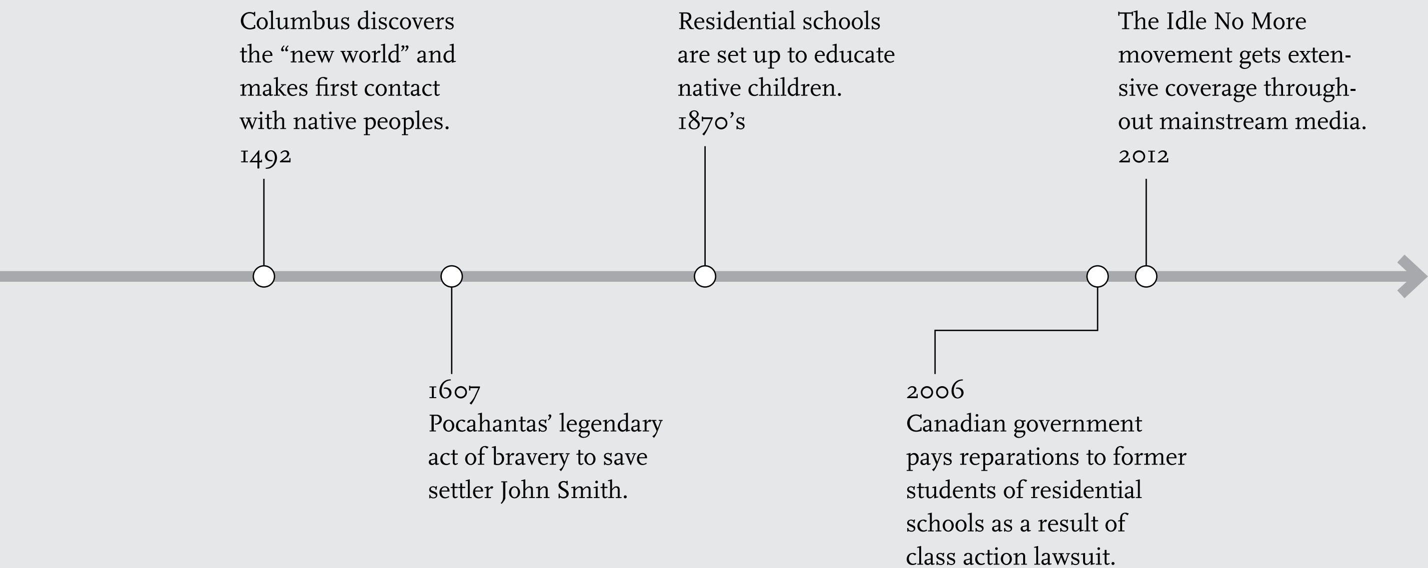
Myths of superiority

Our Mennonite communal narrative conforms to the broader patterns of European pioneer hagiographies. That is, we emphasize heroic tales of our hardworking, faithful, and resilient people, and omit contradictory or shameful details of how we got land, or what happened to First Nations communities. Such narratives of innocence or nobility often mask trauma, deny (or legitimate) settler

A LIMITED NARRATIVE



privilege, and encode attitudes of superiority – all of which inhibit our ability to relate to Indigenous peoples.

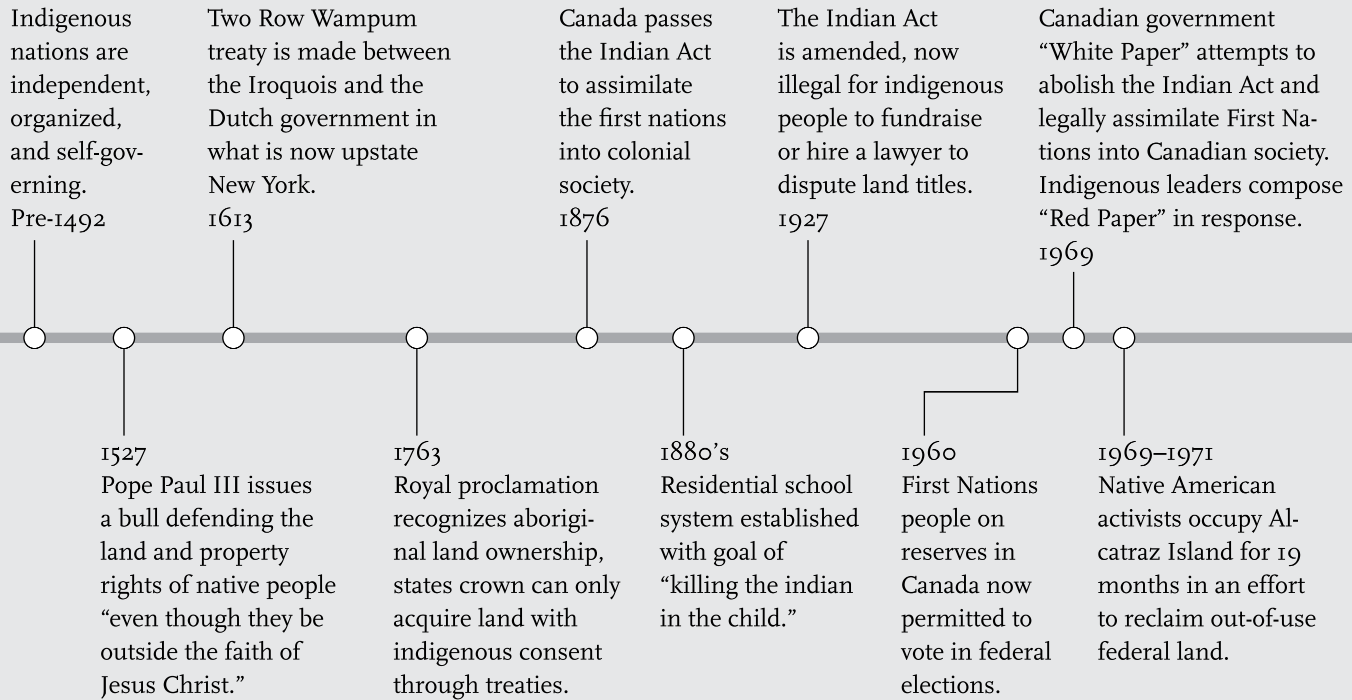
Mennonites typically believe that their immigrant ancestors made the Canadian prairies better and more productive; as one participant put it, "We made good farmland out of swamps." The problem is, this self-congratulatory trope (which lies at the heart of the colonial narrative) insinuates that before European settlement, the land was not cared for properly. Such attitudes have a shadow side, reflected by a workshop participant who shared: "My dad chose to sell our land to an Indigenous tribe. I'm frustrated and ashamed of what comes up inside of me every time I go home to look at that land. They took the land that I worked on – every rock I picked and every tree I watered – and just destroyed it. I'm so angry about it!"

Rather than understanding … colonial violence and dispossession, we blame the victim.

The combined self-perceptions of *immigrant survival* and *settler hard work* has led to a superiority complex among many Mennonites, especially when comparing themselves to Indigenous peoples. One participant summed it up: "The thing I hear most about is our 'overcoming.' Bad things happened to us too, and look what we did! We survived and look what we have become: we've educated our children and grown our businesses. This prevents us from being vulnerable and from connecting with other people who also have struggled."

Our stories of toughness and resilience assure us that we were not damaged by the violence our Mennonite ancestors experienced. Our belief that hard work and faithfulness simply erased our trauma is not only misguided, but plays into pejorative judgments about those who appear weak or wounded from past (or present) violations. It can

A LARGER NARRATIVE

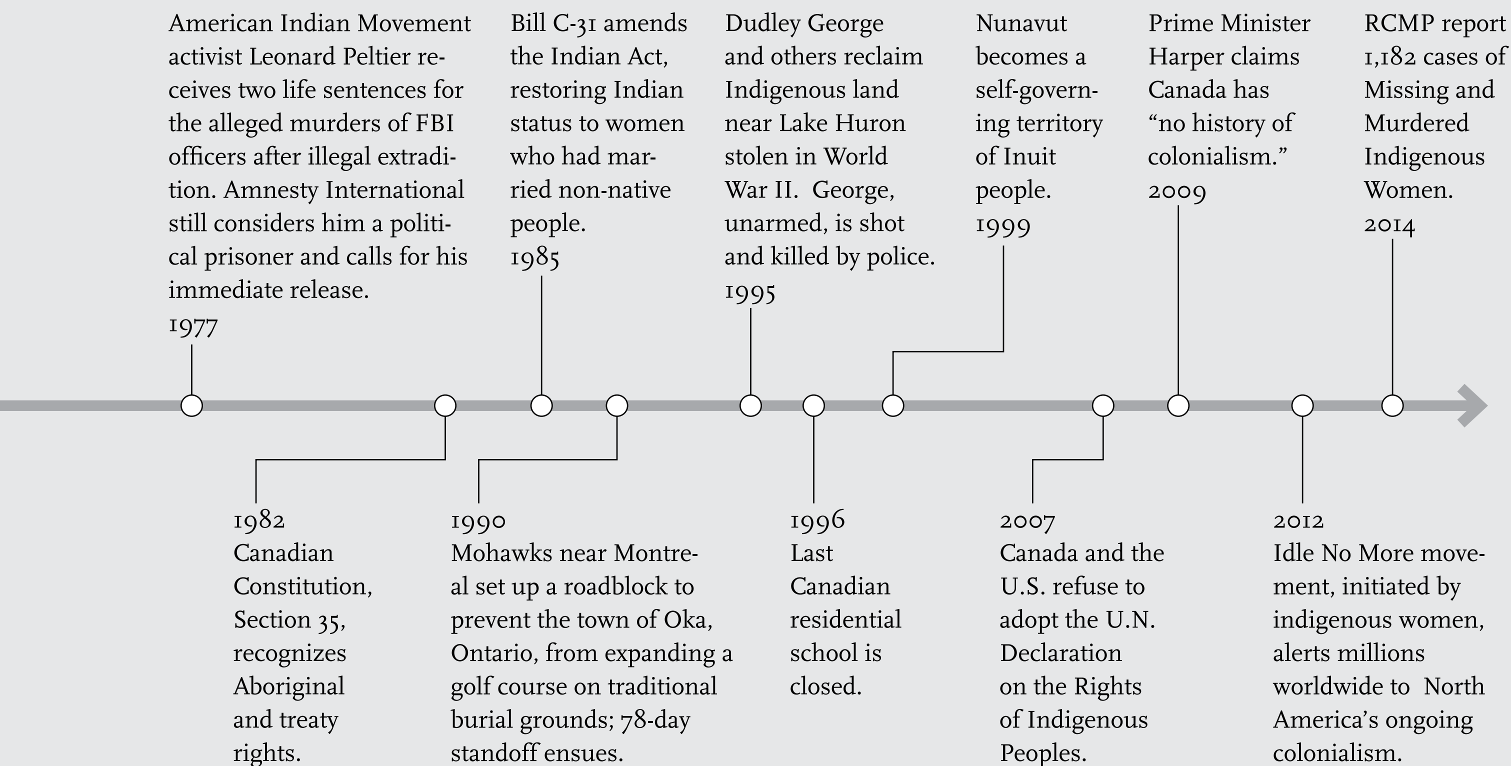


also undergird Mennonite attitudes of paternalistic charity or antipathy towards First Nations. Rather than understanding how poverty, addictions, and crime in Native communities are connected to the continuing legacy of colonial violence and dispossession, we blame the victim.

"We assume that First Nations trauma stemmed from just one historical event, like ours in Russia," said one person I interviewed. "In fact, theirs is a continuous history of being second-class citizens in their own land since the arrival of Europeans." Some Mennonites "think Indigenous people are bad because of the violence they experienced," lamented another workshop participant, so their stories of pain are discredited "all the time." But Mennonites are "unable to tell their own story honestly. They are not willing to be vulnerable, because we might have to admit something about our family that's too hard to deal with." Victimized communities often exhibit symptoms of what social psychologist John Mack calls the "egoism of victimization." A participant recognized that, as Mennonites, we "saw ourselves as victims, needing protection, so we failed to see other issues that were going on. We only want to see our innocence."

Moving from a superiority complex to historical response-ability will involve honestly acknowledging the ways in which racial privileges trumped ethnic differences to advantage Mennonite recovery from marginalization. One interviewee noted that most Mennonites believe "we purchased our land through fair and square deals," and prospered only due to "hard work." But farming is made much more viable and successful if subsidized by granted or cheap land, or by government incentives, tax breaks, preferential markets, assumed water rights, access to transportation and technology, etc.

"Mennonites were given all kinds of special privileges in Russia," said an interviewee. "Some became very wealthy there, partly because they were hard working, but also because they received significant benefits – they were even called *privile-*



gia. We went through a period of trauma, but then we came here, where the Canadian government wanted us and gave us breaks based upon the colour of our skin or work ethic. Before long we were back in positions of privilege; we don't tell *that* side of the story very often!" A notorious example is the case of Stoney Knoll in Saskatchewan, where in the late 19th century land was taken from the Young Chippewayan tribe by the government without consultation or compensation, and granted to Mennonite homesteaders. Our communal narrative must no longer conveniently overlook these parts of the story.

Toward restorative solidarity

I believe that if we Mennonites (and all settlers) "do our own work," as Audrey Lorde says around the issues described above, we can bring to life practices of what I call "restorative solidarity." This will involve embracing historical "response-ability" concerning the colonial legacy *and* building empathy with Native communities victimized by historic and current injustices. We need to listen to how Indigenous communities are identifying harms, needs, and responsibilities, and investigate our past and present complicity. The just-completed Canadian Truth and Reconciliation process gave us an extraordinary opportunity to do this. Then our churches can covenant to become true "Treaty People," working with First Nations to make things as right as possible. This can include covenants of accountability, restitution, reparation, and (ideally) reconciliation.

What are the settler narratives *your* family and social group tell – or don't? Only facing the whole story can prevent painful history from being lived again.

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