



# 'My Loss is Your Loss'

**A resurgence of Indigenous identity and activism invites repentance and response from the descendants of European settlers.**

by **ELAINE ENNS**

**STONEY KNOLL RISES** gently above the Canadian prairies, providing impressive views of the agriculturally rich valley between North and South Saskatchewan Rivers. A sacred site for the Young Chippeways, who call it *Opwashemoe Chakatinaw*, the knoll lies near the center of a 30-square-mile tract selected by their chief in 1876 as part of Treaty Six, a pact between the government and the Indigenous people of central Saskatchewan and Alberta.

And it stands at the heart of a continuing struggle over history, identity, and justice in Saskatchewan. My home place.

In the late 19th century, Young Chippeways—the third-largest Cree tribe to sign Treaty Six—were struggling to survive increasing encroachment by European settlers, spurred by then-Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's aggressive campaign to "open up" the region. The disappearance of the buffalo and devastating epidemics forced the tribe to leave their reserve land in search of food.

In October 1898, the federal government, without consultation or compensation, assigned Young Chippewyan land to be part of a larger area reserved for Mennonite settlers coming from the United States, West Prussia, and Manitoba. My community.

On Aug. 23, 1976, a gathering was held at Fort Carlton, Saskatchewan, to commemorate the signing of Treaty Six. But according to the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations, the anniversary "represented 100 years of broken promises." Chief Rod Okemow refused to accept a commemorative treaty medal. And several dozen Young Chippeways—landless and federally unrecognized since 1889—decided to visit "their land" and talk to a few Mennonite farmers about their situation. For the latter, it was decidedly unsettling.

In response, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada hired Leonard Doell to research the Young Chippewyan claims. Doell has been working tirelessly ever since, learning the stories the land holds, educating Mennonites, and working alongside Young Chippeways for justice. Also my responsibility.

First Nations members dance during an "Idle No More" demonstration on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Canada.

Chris Wattle/Reuters

## Every place in North America has an Indigenous history prior to European colonization.

### A resurgence of identity and activism

Indigenous Peoples' Day, in 2017 observed on Oct. 9, began as a protest of Columbus Day mythology and fanfare. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the 1992 Columbus Quincentenary, during which Indigenous peoples all over the world mobilized to contest the dismembered narratives of European inhabitation of the Americas. Those movements represented a turning point, both for Indigenous self-determination and for settler consciousness. (I use the term "settler" both for the original European settlers in North America and for their descendants today.) In their wake, several key campaigns have broadened and deepened efforts to decolonize land and history on Turtle Island (an Indigenous term for North America).

For example, 10 years ago, after decades of advocacy, the U.N. General Assembly overwhelmingly adopted the landmark Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Only four countries opposed, each with significant histories of unresolved Native claims: Canada, the U.S., New Zealand, and Australia. As international law, UNDRIP affirms Indigenous peoples' right of self-determination; prohibits discrimination and genocide; calls on states to honor and respect treaties; protects Indigenous languages and cultures; and upholds Indigenous rights to lands, territories, and resources.

Though both Canada and the U.S. recently removed their objector status to UNDRIP, violations of its letter and spirit have led to a new era of Indigenous nonviolent direct action around North America. The grassroots movement Idle No More was founded in Saskatchewan in 2012 by four women in response to Canada's weakening of environmental laws. Through "round dance" flash mobs and blockades, Idle No More continues to inspire political actions worldwide for Indigenous sovereignty and rights and oppose environmental degradation, including at the Standing Rock Reservation in the Dakotas.

The astonishing courage and persistence

of "water protectors" opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock captured international attention for much of last year. While Sioux tribal leadership had been opposing the pipeline for years, in April 2016 the first of four encampments was established on the pipeline's route. Over the following nine months, some 8,000 people came to help occupy the contested site, including religious leaders, veterans, and, most important, representatives of more than 280 Native nations from around the world. The prayers of Indigenous elders grounded dramatic nonviolent confrontations with pipeline security, changing the face of ecojustice activism.

"The reality is that extractive industries have been part of the experience of every single tribe in the U.S.," said Kyle Powys Whyte, a Michigan State University professor and member of the Potawatomi Nation, last November. "In a lot of ways, the activism, the acts of protection we engage in today are no different from what our ancestors were doing 200 years ago when they were facing the barrage of U.S. colonialism. ... We always re-situate what we're doing and the heritage of our ancestors."

### How are "settlers" responding?

Every place in North America has an Indigenous history prior to European colonization. But we settlers are only now beginning to engage this history and its implications. So how are we responding to the resurgence of Indigenous identity and activism, particularly faith-rooted activists, congregations, and denominational bodies? Here are some conscientious examples:

■ Several denominations have passed (or are in deliberation about) statements *repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery* (the medieval legal, philosophical, and theological framework that rationalized theft of land and dehumanization of Indigenous Peoples around the globe). The Ted & Company theater company has begun touring a play titled "Discovery: A Comic Lament," which seeks to educate and challenge settler churches

about the doctrine. Numerous evangelical universities have invited Navajo educator Mark Charles to talk about the doctrine's bitter legacy, and he does not hold back.

■ The Kairos ecumenical initiative in Canada has for years employed the "*blanket exercise*" to dramatize for congregations the history of conquest and ongoing issues of sovereignty, land, and justice; this embodied mapping experience is now widely used in the U.S. as well.

■ Churches are supporting efforts of *historical truth-telling*. For example, congregations have collaborated with the Return to the Earth project, founded by Cheyenne Peace Chief Lawrence Hart, to repatriate Native remains from settler institutions. Churches in the Twin Cities have supported Mohican educator/activist Jim Bear Jacobs in his Healing Minnesota Stories campaign to revise "heroic" settler accounts from the perspective of Indigenous victims. And some 500 clergy from many denominations and faiths gathered at Standing Rock to acknowledge wrongs done and make a formal apology to Indigenous leaders there.

■ Last year on Indigenous Peoples' Day, we organized a Bartimaeus Institute in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, titled "The TRC Calls Churches to Action: Building Capacity for *Restorative Solidarity*." Indigenous and settler leaders from across Canada wrestled together on how to respond to the historic Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action, nine of which were specifically directed toward churches. From that gathering a "Pilgrimage for Indigenous Rights" was organized in which mostly Christian participants walked almost 400 miles from Kitchener to Ottawa, Ontario, in support of the Canadian adoption and implementation of UNDRIP.

■ And individual leaders are *apprenticing themselves to Indigenous wisdom*. For example, evangelical Joshua Grace, pastor of Circle of Hope in Philadelphia, graduated from the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies, which is helping change the theological conversation. And French Canadian Catholic activist/artist Denise Nadeau has worked closely with the Water Walkers movement led by Anishinaabe grandmothers.

These are just some of the ways that settlers are taking what I call historical "response-ability" for the continuing legacy of Indigenous dispossession.

### Backpacks full of gasoline

But there are also deeper issues of identity and consciousness that we settlers must work with, theologically and psychologically. I am investigating ways in which dominant settler narratives suppress and distort our family immigrant histories, so that we can get at how our ancestors, directly or indirectly, may have been involved in injustice. I am also probing how intergenerational trauma influences not only Indigenous communities but settler descendants as well, beginning with my own people.

Our workshops encourage settlers to "do our own work," as Audre Lorde famously put it, by delving into the particularities of our family or community narrative. We use the metaphor of the backpack that we carry (borrowed from Peggy McIntosh's anti-racism work), which is full of privilege, distortions, self-justifying myths, and unexamined trauma. In Iowa, a participant objected that this kind of deep identity work wasn't addressing the urgency of "all the burning buildings" of this historical moment. "If we *don't* do this work," another participant responded, "we will be running into burning buildings with backpacks full of gasoline and make the fire worse!" This is a powerful caution to settler activists who presume we can help, or that our good intentions can solve thorny historical problems. We must work to see how we carry the contradictions as we seek to understand what "restorative solidarity" might demand of us.

Which brings me back to Stoney Knoll. This work is deeply personal; my oldest sister lives just a few miles from that site, on a farm her husband inherited from the first Mennonite settlers, adjacent to the reserve of the Beardy's and Okemasis' Cree Nation. "This land is a refuge for me," she told me a few years ago. "But for a quarter century we always went *west*, to the settler towns of Laird and Tiefengrund—never *east* toward Beardy's. However, for the last decade I have been teaching mostly Indigenous kids at a public school near the reserve, which has opened up a whole new side of my connection

to this land—and to our closest neighbors."

Currently, half of Stoney Knoll is owned by a Mennonite family, the other half by a Lutheran church. In August 2006, a gathering marking the 130th anniversary of the signing of Treaty Six took place at Stoney Knoll. It was organized by Young Chippewayans, the Office of the Treaty Commissioner, representatives from Mennonite and Lutheran churches in the area, and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Saskatchewan. Some 130 people participated in a sacred pipe ceremony and the signing of a covenant of cooperation.

Conversations continue between MCC leaders, local landowners, and tribal members about how to correct the historical disenfranchisement of the Young Chippewayans. Efforts include the Spruce River Folk Festival, an annual cultural event focusing on landless bands within Saskatchewan, with proceeds going to Young Chippewayans. MCC has established a Stoney Knoll program fund that supports the ongoing land claim and reconciliation efforts between Mennonites, Lutherans, and Young Chippewayans; more than \$60,000 dollars has been raised to date. But we have a long way to go to heal the legacy of colonization and its continuing injustices.

### Making our histories one story

This summer I had lunch with Harry Lafond, executive director of the Office of the Treaty Commissioner in Saskatchewan, who played such an important role in both my research and our institute last year. We discussed ongoing efforts of regional churches to respond to the TRC's calls to action.

"My loss is your loss," Lafond told me. "It's much more powerful if we can merge our histories and make them one story." Indigenous leaders such as Lafond understand that our healing as settlers depends on our willingness and ability to revise our narratives, re-member the stories of the land and its First Peoples, and help right wrongs.

The TRC has brought painful historical



Chief Ben Weenie of the Young Chippewayan First Nation, center, signs a covenant with Mennonite representative Abram J. Funk, left, and Lutheran Robert Schultz.

truths to the forefront of Canadian awareness. But most U.S. settlers remain ignorant of our parallel history of colonization, including the horrific legacy of Indian boarding schools, in which churches were deeply complicit. We have work to do, which must be directed inward as well as outward, engaging the past as well as the future.

But there is good news for those who labor to heal historic violations and their legacies, expressed by the 8th-century prophet Jeremiah: "In those days people will no longer say, 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'" (Jeremiah 31:29). The prophet was citing a proverb of ancient Israel, lamenting what we today call "intergenerational trauma." He recognized that people bear the scars of historical wrongs, both those done *to* and *by* their ancestors. But he also envisioned a day when our communities would be liberated from these shadows. My hope. ■

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