

Presidential Address. Starting with Water: Canada, Colonialism, and History at 2019

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Article abstract

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Adele Perry - CHA President | Présidente de la SHC, 2017-2019

Presidential Address

Starting with Water: Canada, Colonialism, and History at 2019

ADELE PERRY*

Abstract

How does history look when we begin with water? Here, I want to address the possibilities of thinking about water, particularly through the its relationship to colonialism, and especially in the watery, geographical centre of North America that we might call the western edge of the Anishinaabeg world, and we also might call the space between modern Winnipeg and the Lake of the Woods. To discuss histories of water here, I will draw on Indigenous Studies, critical colonial history, histories of the environment, and urban space, and the questions prompted by the present of 2019, sitting as it does in the wake of the completion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2015, and the commemoration of the sesquicentennial of the British North America Act (BNA) in 2017. As the Canadian Historical Association/Société Historique du Canada (CHA/SHC) approaches its 100th anniversary in 2022, and as we think and act around the role of scholarly disciplines, including history, in the institutional, social, and intellectual scaffolding of the ongoing project of Canadian colonialism. These are some of the questions that water can lead us to. I will begin by talking about water, history, and settler colonialism, and then turn to histories of water at the meeting of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, and to histories of dispossession in the Lake of the Woods watershed before returning to our colonial present, and the role of histories and historians in that present.

Water, History, and Colonialism

Michèle Dagenais' study of Montréal has shown that water is a powerful lens for approaching urban history.¹ Water's history demands particular attention when we begin with one of the core concepts of environmental history, namely, that non-human actors have agency

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and stories to tell. This has or should have resonance with Indigenous ontologies. As historian Lianne Leddy explains, Anishinaabeg begin with the presumption that humans are “part of, rather than separate from, our environment.”² Beginning history from the presumption that human and environmental histories are invariably connected equips us to engage with the long histories and quickening patterns of contemporary climate change.³

For all of this it can be hard to register the histories of water, at least in the context of twenty-first century urban North America. As Patricia Nelson Limerick and Jason L. Hanson note in their study of Denver, Colorado, the beneficiaries of modern, urban tap water don’t pay “an ounce of attention” to it. Water becomes part of a “comfort-supplying infrastructure” that, in effect, produces the conditions of its own invisibility.⁴ This invisibility of water is both reflective and constitutive of a lived history of settler colonialism. Historian Nick Estes explains that settler colonialism is replicative — attempting to “permanently and completely replace Natives with a settler population” — but also changing and never complete.⁵ Settler colonialism is about arrival and displacement, and also about chronology, scale, and duration. It works in ways that can make it hard to register, parse, and challenge, as Laura Ishiguro’s important study of family correspondence in nineteenth and early twentieth century British Columbia shows in vivid terms.⁶ Water complicated the reorganization of North American space along colonial lines. For First Nations in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Great Lakes watershed, borders were “mere lines drawn upon the water,” disrupted or even erased by lived experience.⁷

In the last five years the number of First Nations on either short or long-term drinking water advisories became a sharp register of the enormous and persistent gaps between Indigenous and settler populations in contemporary Canada.⁸ Water is an issue not only in Indigenous communities. Problems with urban water supplies still make headlines across the country, including, most recently, reports of dangerously high levels of lead.⁹ But drinking water advisories have particular and enduring meaning for Indigenous people and communities. Along with murdered and missing Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirited people, the over incarceration of Indigenous people in Canadian prisons, and the radical over-representation of Indigenous children in provincial and territorial child welfare systems, water is a marker of how Canada is structured to destabilize, impoverish, and

ultimately imperil Indigenous life. As Mary Jane Logan McCallum and I argued recently in *Structures of Indifference: An Indigenous Life and Death in a Canadian City*, the tangible costs of these structural inequities have been on routine and disheartening display in the last few years.¹⁰

In 2016, I published a short book on histories of colonialism and Winnipeg, Manitoba's drinking water. *Aqueduct* is a work of public or engaged history, researched and written in a different temporal register from the main thread of my research.¹¹ *Aqueduct* addressed the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, had its sights firmly on the local, and used records that were either nearby to my home in Winnipeg, or had been made available on digital platforms, including particularly relevant files in the Department of Indian Affairs records that had been uploaded to the Library and Archives Canada website, thanks to new policies prioritizing digitization. It is easy to say this is a different kind of historical project, but it is more accurate to locate *Aqueduct* within a long tradition of public-facing and engaged historical writing in Canada.¹² My research on Winnipeg, water, and colonialism was conceived as an intervention into a public conversation, one that would provide context and meaning to discussions around the city, Shoal Lake 40 First Nation, and their mutual and massively unequal histories. I have continued to work on the project, pushing it backwards in time and toward the connections between municipal water and the histories of residential schooling and colonization. I turn to these histories before returning to historians in Canada's colonial present.

Standing at the Forks, Looking East

What is now the city of Winnipeg sits at the meeting point of the Red and Assiniboine rivers. This was the site of ancient and changing histories of Lakota/Dakota, Anishinaabeg, Inninuwak, Cree and Métis people. Human history is long here, reaching back at least 6,000 years.¹³ The ancient Forks was a place of trade and meeting, but also settlement and probably agriculture. Storage pits, bison scapula hoes, grinding stones, and charred corn kernels are archives of what Sarah Carter calls the "Ancient Women Farmers" of the North American Great Plains.¹⁴

Inked in 1670, the Royal Charter of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) had pretense to a certain kind of territorial control, granting the company and its successors "sole Trade and Commerce" in

the waterways and lands draining from Hudson Bay. Here was the doctrine of discovery, a colonial claim to that which was “not now actually possessed by any of our Subjects, or by the Subjects of any other Christian Prince or State.”¹⁵ These were grand colonial claims, ones that were belied by a history of non-Indigenous arrival that was, for a century, nothing more than small-scale, fragile, and intermittent. Handfuls of European interlopers, most of them tied to French commercial interests and the fur-trade, began to pass through beginning in the 1720s, finding themselves on the western edge of what historian Michael Witgen calls the “Native New World in the heartland of North America.” Here, as Scott Berthelette explains, Europeans navigated autonomous Inninuwak, Lakota/Dakota and Anishinaabeg social and political formations, ones that invariably “dictated the terms of alliance” and subverted imperial ambitions.¹⁶

The character of the colonial project shifted when the HBC granted over 185,000 kilometers of land to a major investor with a vision of settler colonialism. Like the fur-traders, Lord Selkirk also needed to build and maintain relationships with Indigenous polities. The 1817 Selkirk Treaty, which promised a “Present or Quitrent” of cash and tobacco and was signed with *dodems* by Peguis and four other Anishinaabeg and Inninuwak leaders — Mache Wheseab, Mechkaddewikonaie, Kayajieskebinoa, and Ouckidoat — was one way he did so.¹⁷ As Norma Hall explains, numbers of non-Indigenous arrivals to Red River settlement were modest and mostly temporary. By 1826, “most of the external migrants had decided to depart” and the community was mainly Métis.¹⁸ Over the course of what we might call the short nineteenth century, Red River’s population growth was overwhelmingly Indigenous, and particularly Métis. By 1870, about 10,000 of Red River’s approximately 12,000 residents were Métis, and roughly another 550 were described as Indians. A substantial part of the remaining population had been born in the Northwest and was tied by kinship or connection to one or more Indigenous communities.¹⁹

It is for good reason that literary scholars Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair and Warren Cariou call Manitoba a land of water.²⁰ For Anishinaabeg, water is not a resource to be owned or consumed but an animate presence that people, and especially women, live in relationship to.²¹ It was necessary to do so in the wet and changing landscape of southern Manitoba. Historical geographer Shannon Stunden Bower describes this as a variable, dynamic landscape where much depended

on precipitation and changes in temperature. Nineteenth century Anishinaabeg and Inninuwak economies were oriented toward seeing wetlands as resources to be valued, rather than problems to be solved.²² Historical archaeologist Kevin Brownlee notes that scholars' frequent tendency to associate these societies with big game hunting obscures the importance of fish "as a main resource" extending back some 6,000 years.²³ The largely Métis world that developed along the Red and Assiniboine rivers developed its own histories and relationship with waters, including the tricky, variable rivers. The rivers were "as essential an element to the settlement as the very land they tilled."²⁴ Families "built along the river banks for convenience in obtaining water," and outside of swamps and sloughs "the river was practically the only reliable source of steady water supply."²⁵

Britain's unilateral decision to "transfer" Rupert's Land from the HBC to Canada was the latest in a string of what Adam Gaudry has called "fantasies of sovereignty."²⁶ The successful Métis resistance and state-making of 1869–1870 that culminated in the passage of the *Manitoba Act*, also known as the Manitoba Treaty to Louis Riel and others, made this clear to all concerned. The negotiation of the first of the numbered treaties with Canada, locally known as the Stone Fort Treaty in 1871, the introduction of the *Dominions Lands Act* in 1872, the creation of the new *Indian Act* in 1876, the granting of block settlements for those framed as ethnic migrants, and the construction of a reserve and residential school system in the early 1880s all signalled the making of a new colonial order.

Winnipeg was a particular site within this new colonial order. A combination of policy, violence, and chicanery meant that the promises of the Manitoba Act were largely undelivered to those it described as "the families of the half-breed residents." Métis people lost much of their lands and the less stable category of social influence and safety. Ryan Eyford's book, *White Settler Reserve*, maps out the process by which southern Manitoba in the 1880s became a patchwork of lands reserved and regulated for First Nations, Métis, and certain ethnic migrant groups, especially German-speaking Russian Mennonites and Icelanders, who arrived as part of block settlement schemes.²⁷

In this remade landscape, Winnipeg was recreated as a non-Indigenous space. That the city incorporated first in 1873 and again in 1874 under the Cree word for bad or dirty water suggested water was a problem, and it would remain one.²⁸ Winnipeg's early municipal government contracted a private company to supply the city with

river water, but by the late 1880s the arrangement was in political trouble, and the company explained that it was hard to supply water to “an unusually scattered place” that wanted to compete with other “rising” cities.²⁹ By 1900, the city had bought the private company out of their contract, turning instead to artesian well water to supply the city.³⁰

The non-Indigenous population growth upon which aspirations to nation and capitalism were premised did not arrive until the first years of the twentieth century, but when they arrived, they did so in great numbers and to much fanfare. In 1902, the city recorded a population of a little under 45,000. Four years later, it was over 100,000, reflecting shifting federal immigration policies and changing geographies of settler colonialism in North America, and laying the groundwork for the city’s particularly robust history of ethnic radicalism.³¹ The city was reimagined in terms that informally and sometimes formally excluded Indigenous people. In the last decades of the nineteenth-century and the first decade of the twentieth century, the official census counts of “Indian” and “Métis” people within the city of Winnipeg never reached two percent.³² No doubt these numbers are low, reflecting the boundaries of the city and the formal and informal disincentives to acknowledge people as Indigenous. Around the edges of the city, as throughout western Canada, there were Métis communities. In 1887, these communities were described as “the very poor and the squatters living in mere huts in certain parts of the city,” and defined as outside of the expectations for municipal drinking water. The Métis community of Rooster Town, which found itself at Winnipeg’s southern edge, would get its water from a common pipe until the community itself was conclusively dispossessed in the late 1950s.³³

The possibility of bringing Shoal Lake water to Winnipeg was moved to the fore of civic plans through the advocacy of Thomas Russ Deacon, a southern-Ontario born and educated civil engineer. In the late nineteenth century, Deacon was in and around Kenora, serving as an alderman, designing the town’s first water supply, and working in mining, especially with the Mikado gold mine, one of three working mines on Shoal Lake.³⁴ Deacon came to know Shoal Lake well in the ways that a resourced settler might. Deacon’s son recalled that it was his father’s “Indian companion” who pointed out the particular geography upon which the aqueduct depended.³⁵ Deacon reportedly “bought up many of the islands he liked,” giving some away to friends,

and allowing his new wife to choose one for a cottage, which would remain in the family until the 1960s, at least.³⁶

The Lake of the Woods mining boom faltered in the first years of the twentieth century, and Deacon moved to Winnipeg, trading the resource frontier for the ambitious, settler city. Deacon was part of the transformation of Winnipeg's economic elite in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century, and part of what Don Nerbas called "a powerful enclave" that used civic politics to advance business interests. Deacon, who was president of the Manitoba Iron and Bridge Works, refused to recognize unions, extolled the virtues of free enterprise, and represented what one labour activist referred to as "the old paternalistic Ontario 'bush culture' of that period."³⁷ Deacon was elected Winnipeg City Councillor in 1906, and in 1912 was elected mayor on a "Shoal Lake water" platform, pledging: "I am in favor of providing at once for the people of Winnipeg an ample and permanent supply of pure soft water, which will forever remove the menace now hanging over Winnipeg of a water famine and the consequent danger of conflagration and sickness."³⁸

Bringing the very different water of Lake of the Woods on a scale made possible by a concrete aqueduct would be nothing short of radically transformative, and it was seen and promoted as such.³⁹ The project was expensive, and required Deacon to galvanize support from different communities who had access to municipal suffrage. Deacon led at least two "inspection trips" to Shoal Lake, taking a mix of community leaders and provincial and civic politicians to see the prospective water supply. During one trip in September 1913, Deacon took an "occasional turn at the wheel" of the borrowed Young Men's Christian Association camp boat. On board were more than forty men, a mix of provincial and civic politicians, leaders of community organizations, and at least two representatives of the labour movement — Edward McGrath from the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council (WTLC) and A.W. Puttee, former Member of Parliament, a labour moderate, and editor of the labour newspaper, *The Voice*.⁴⁰

Dispossession and Repossession

The Lake of the Woods watershed had its own histories of water and colonialism. Historian Brenda Child explains that Anishinaabeg "gardens developed in microclimates where water along the Lake of the Woods and Rainy River worked to prevent early frost."⁴¹ The

particular colonial economy of the fur-trade arrived in the late seventeenth century, and its histories were distinct from either the model or the experience of settler colonialism. Annishinaabeg agriculture would supply HBC posts with potatoes, Indian corn, pumpkins, onions, and carrots. According to traders' counts, Annishinaabeg populations expanded in the mid-nineteenth century, at least in the Lac La Pluie District, where the population grew by 393 percent over 53 years between 1822 and 1875.⁴²

The histories that led to Red River being remade as a small and conflicted Canadian province played out differently in the watery lands that stood between the Northwest and the Canadas. Treaty 3 was inked in 1873 at the Northwest Angle, but what it meant to the Annishinaabeg and the Canadians, as historian Brittany Luby has argued, differed on a number of critical terms — including the Treaty's provisions for settlers' rights to what signatory Chief Sakatcheway described as the “waters out of which you sometimes take food for yourselves.”⁴³ The regulatory regime of the *Indian Act*, especially after the revisions of 1881, combined with an environment being remade to favour settler commerce, including through damming begun in 1887 to deal a body blow to Indigenous agriculture. The amount of land under grain and root crop cultivation in the Lake of the Woods agency of the department of Indian Affairs declined from 214 acres in 1882 to 109 acres in 1890, and to a low-point of 15.25 acres chiefly for potatoes, in 1920.⁴⁴

Like Indigenous people elsewhere, Annishinaabeg at the Lake of the Woods combined wage work and agricultural and harvesting practices in ways that belied distinctions between so-called modern and traditional. Born in the last years of the nineteenth century, James Redsky recalled a careful seasonal family economy: they tapped sugar ash, trapped muskrats, hunted deer and moose, dried and stored meat; they fished, cultivated and processed *manoomin* or wild rice; they berried, and raised hay for the two teams of horses and fourteen head of cattle his father kept. In the spring, the Redsky family planted potatoes, corn, squash, carrots and turnips. Vegetables and meat were processed and stored in an *atasoon*, a birch bark storage house. “We always had full stomachs in those days,” Redsky recalled in 1972.⁴⁵ In 1913, an Indian Agent reported that the occupations of Shoal Lake 40 and the neighbouring community of Iskatewizaagegan or Shoal Lake 39: “Trapping, hunting, fishing, working on steamers and in the lumber camps.” Some families maintained “very nice gardens.”⁴⁶

Residential schooling represented a pointed form of colonial intrusion. The Presbyterian Church in Canada had its eye on the Lake of the Woods in 1901, noting that the population “is wholly pagan” and “good specimens of manhood” and “a fine, stalwart race, willing to work as opportunity offers, and capable of great endurance.”⁴⁷ The particular role of settler women was written into the name of the school, dedicated to a member of the Women’s Missionary Society, Cecilia Jeffrey, described as “the Indian’s friend.”⁴⁸ Anishinaabeg parents around Shoal Lake tried to negotiate the school on their own terms. Historian Victoria Freeman explains that in 1902 Shoal Lake chiefs Pete Redsky and Pagindawind negotiated a substantive agreement with the Presbyterian Church Board of Winnipeg, which stipulated: that young children should not be baptized without their parents’ consent; that children not be transferred without their parents’ agreement; that children under eight years of age not be given heavy labour; that older children were to attend school for at least half of the day; that children could share in whatever profits the school might receive from farm produce; that parents be allowed to take children to Anishinaabeg ceremonies; that older children would get at least three weeks’ holiday for berry picking or harvesting manoomin; that children be allowed to visit sick kin; that police not be used to retrieve children who left the school.⁴⁹

The Cecilia Jeffrey school opened in 1902, just east of the Shoal Lake 40 reserve. This residential school, like others, required the labour of its students to function, and a predictable list of gendered tasks — housework, mending, cooking, washing, and ironing — aimed to transform Indigenous women and, through them, communities.⁵⁰ The vision of a school that was accountable to Anishinaabeg culture, economy, and kinship had some impact. Chief Redsky was one of three chiefs who spoke at the school’s Christmas concert in 1906,⁵¹ and letters of protest to federal officials were sometimes written from the school. But Cecilia Jeffrey, like the larger system it was a part of, was soon in a perpetual and revealing state of crisis and conflict. “The last inspection report on the Cecilia Jeffrey Boarding School does not leave a very favourable impression of this institution,” explained an Ottawa official in 1908. There had been an entire change in staff since the last inspection, the Principal was overworked and ineffective, children were not well dressed for cold weather, bedding was insufficient, the school was hard to reach, poorly heated, and had no “systematic” water supply. The Department of Indian Affairs asked that the missionary church

take action and “make the school popular with the Indians.”⁵² Illness, and especially tuberculosis, was enough of a problem that Cecilia Jeffrey was one of the two schools assigned a permanent nurse in 1914,⁵³ though a decade later that practice was discontinued in the name of Indian Affairs’ perpetual concern, cost.⁵⁴ Parents and communities continued to advocate for a different sort of schooling. Shoal Lake 39, or Iskatewizaagegan, and Shoal Lake 40 submitted a four-page report of their meeting protesting the 1925 decision to relocate the school, noting that “We would then rather have a day School as to provide us what you have promised us in the first place,” likely a reference to the promise in Treaty 3 that the Crown would “maintain schools for instruction in such reserves hereby made as to Her Government of Her Dominion of Canada may seem advisable whenever the Indians of the reserve shall desire it.”⁵⁵ But the school, such as it was, moved farther away to a location near Kenora, in 1929.

The pace and character of dispossession shifted in these lands and waters with the arrival of the Greater Winnipeg Water District (GWWD). In 1913, with the permission of the Department of Indian Affairs, the GWWD began to survey and do preliminary work on the aqueduct on the Shoal Lake 40 reserve. There, they availed themselves of the resources of the residential school, boarding the chemist tasked with testing the drinking water at Cecilia Jeffrey.⁵⁶ Soon after, the First Nation lost their rights to gravel and sand on the reserve through what was, in these years, a well-worn mechanism of dispossession: surrender.⁵⁷ A year later, Department of Indian Affairs officials brought in a more intrusive piece of colonial fiat: Section 46 of the *Indian Act*, which from 1906 to 1951 allowed the federal government to take and set a price for reserve land that was deemed necessary for public works without any consultation. In the correspondence leading up to and surrounding this loss, the rights of Indigenous people to reserve lands occasionally came up, as when an official from the International Joint Commission reminded Deacon that “some of the lands in the vicinity of Shoal Lake are Indian Lands,” and that “this government has no control over these lands.”⁵⁸ A year later in 1914, the leading official in the Department of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott, would ask that Winnipeg clarify what it was doing on Shoal Lake 40’s reserve, reminding officials “that no rights can be granted without the consent of the Indians.”⁵⁹ None of this lip service to Indigenous or treaty rights stopped any of the settler governments involved from putting the priorities and interests of Winnipeg above those of Shoal Lake 40.

In December 1915, two and a half years after the GWWD entered the reserve to begin construction, the city of Winnipeg wrote a cheque for \$1,500 and, a few months later, the Privy Council confirmed that the city thus owned some 3,500 acres of Shoal Lake 40's reserve lands, cutting the reserve into three pieces.⁶⁰ Four years later, Chief Pete Redsky would write asking "the Government to pay for the Reserve," reminding officials that the land taken by Winnipeg was "the best part of our Reserve," the part that was good for farming, timber, and hay.⁶¹

The loss of reserve lands in the interests of Winnipeg's water has structured Shoal Lake 40's twentieth and twenty-first century in consequential and enduring ways. The loss of land and the associated engineering works made Shoal Lake 40 an artificial island, and travel, commerce, and accessing services became complicated and sometimes dangerous. The changes to land made in the interests of Winnipeg's water also made funding, building, and maintaining water treatment facilities difficult. Freedom Road, an all-season gravel road that connects Shoal Lake 40 to the TransCanada Highway, opened in June of 2019, just slightly more than a century after Shoal Lake water ran through Winnipeg mains in March of 1919. Locally, the aqueduct has been and, to some extent, continues to be framed as a singular triumph of engineering and public policy. The development of municipal water supplies elsewhere in western Canada around the same time suggests these developments were part of broader shifts in knowledge, capacity, and infrastructure, not to mention the availability of tools for taking Indigenous lands and resources.⁶²

In Winnipeg, the arrival of Shoal Lake water was registered within languages of industrial and population growth, public health, and women's domestic labour. In 1915, the local press' women's column noted that "the women of the city" were "keenly interested" in the new source of soft water, calling it a "boon for housewives."⁶³ Mayor Deacon urged "Ladies" to use their limited municipal franchise to support raising civic taxes to support the aqueduct, explaining that an "Abundance of good soft water in the taps will lighten the burden of the household work," and urging them to deny their husbands dinner on voting day until they had voted.⁶⁴ The project of harnessing Shoal Lake water for the settler city became tied to the project of first wave feminism and social reform, and members of the Local Council of Women joined with attendees of the 1918 Conference on Urban and Rural Development in Canada in taking a tour of the building

site of the Aqueduct that year.⁶⁵ After Shoal Lake water ran through Winnipeg's taps, the Local Council of Women wrote to the City Council "expressing satisfaction with the Shoal Lake Water Supply." In a context where questions about "the quality of Shoal Lake water" were circulating in the popular press, these were valued affirmations of what was an expensive and risky project.⁶⁶

Shoal Lake water allowed the settler city to grow, and it also remade some of the space between Winnipeg and the Lake of the Woods. In July 1915, a meeting was held to, as labour leader A.W. Puttee explained, "consider the possibility of locating some of the many unemployed men on forty acre farms along the line of the Water District."⁶⁷ What developed over the next year was called both a "Colonization Scheme" or a "Land Settlement" programme, and involved working with federal authorities to provide homesteads to settlers for lands between Winnipeg and Shoal Lake, especially along the Birch River. The mayor would explain that Winnipeg and Canada's colonial project would be served in a range of ways by this resettlement plan, which would "relieve a very serious unemployment situation and at the same time create a future revenue for the railway by development of such natural resources as existed in the country traversed."⁶⁸ By 1919, nine townships of land had been "reserved for colonists," adding a new dimension to the spacialization of empire in southern Manitoba. Along with the homesteads came a "model industrial farm" and displays of "grains, grasses, and vegetables grown along the Water District Railway," and the infrastructure considered essential for non-Indigenous settlement, notably drainage and schools, three by 1919.⁶⁹

Here, as elsewhere in nineteenth and twentieth century Canada, visions for non-Indigenous settlement, appropriately described as schemes, produced results that, in their own way, complicated the colonial projects that produced them. The settlers who accessed land through the GWWD colonization scheme had immigrant stories and national identities that kept them hovering at the edges of operative definitions of Britishness and whiteness, especially during wartime. In 1916, the agent explained that land would go to British subjects or the subjects of allied or neutral countries, and that "Foreigners applying for entry had better provide themselves with certificates of naturalization or passports or other documentary evidence" of their "nationality."⁷⁰ Three years later, someone observed that Whitemouth's settlers were "nearly all Austrians, and during the war were very uncertain about their prospects." These were "foreign settlements,"⁷¹ built during

wartime on Indigenous lands, and in the Winnipeg that emerged during the first decades of the twentieth century, it was the axis of national difference, and of danger, that invariably commanded the most attention. As Kurt Korneski and Owen Toews have both shown, the left- and right-wing visions of Winnipeg and Canada that jelled during the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 shared a common erasure of Indigenous peoples, and it is one that it has been easy, even comfortable, for historians to replicate.⁷²

Returning to Us

What does history look like when we begin with, and return to, water? How are histories of colonialism shaped by water, and vice versa? To ask these questions in 2019 is to do so amid a particular set of questions and histories. Winnipeg has now relied on Shoal Lake water for a solid century, and Shoal Lake has been on a drinking water advisory since 1997, and the tenacity of this predicament can be tied directly to the land loss and engineering works made in the name of Winnipeg's water. I also ask this question in a context where scholarly disciplines and professions are thinking about the ties that bind them to empire in the past and the present. Within the context of Canadian history, these questions were given shape and urgency by the 2015 release of the *Final Report* of the TRC, a broad and rigorous investigation into the history of residential schooling, and ultimately Canada. Some have pointed out the limits of discourses of recognition and reconciliation embedded in this process, noting, as Audra Simpson has, that "The settler state is asking to forgive and to forget, with no land back, no justice and no peace."⁷³

In 2019, it is clear that the language of reconciliation is unable to meaningfully grapple with the structural and material conditions of an ongoing colonial project that provides resources to settler communities and impoverishes Indigenous ones. On the heels of the TRC's *Final Report*, came Canada 150 and a \$600 million birthday party with an emphasis on celebrating diversity and inclusion, Canada's "natural beauty," and the "spirit of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples."⁷⁴ What stole the national commemorative show was more complicated and critical, work that upended attempts to scaffold a cozy kind of nationalism on the back of the BNA by articulating histories that, as Kiera Ladner and Myra Tait explain, "mar Canada's cheery self-image of being a peace-loving, just, and fair people."⁷⁵ A wide range of schol-

arly, artistic, and activist Indigenous and allied production spoke back directly and pointedly to Canada 150. Visual artist Kent Monkman “crashed” the Canada at 150 party with carefully researched and masterfully executed paintings that simultaneously queered, Indigenized, and deeply discomforted some of the most iconic images of Confederation. Historians Crystal Fraser and Sara Komarnisky wrote “150 Acts of Reconciliation for the last 150 days of Canada’s 150th,” artist Christi Belcourt spoke “Canada, I can Cite for you 150,” and historian Jesse Thistle worked with the Graphic History Collective to visualize “When Canada Opened Fire on My Kokum Marianne With a Gatling Gun.”⁷⁶ Canada 150 would not be the same.

What it means to be a historian of Canada has been changed by these events and these discussions, and it couldn’t be any other way. The central role that history and historical scholarship played in and around the TRC is important evidence of the enduring impact and relevance of historians’ work. Even conventional scholarly discussions of confederation and its histories hurried up for publication in 2017, including ones I contributed to, display caution and a search for more nuanced ways of speaking about the making of Canada as a particular kind of national and colonial project.⁷⁷ Historiography is usually defined as the study of historical writing, but that seems to me an impoverished way of describing what can be perfunctory, schematic, or tedious, but can also be a robust intellectual practice of locating our work within both scholarly community and history, of being mindful and proactive about what cultural theorist Sara Ahmed calls citational practice.⁷⁸ When we place our research and writing within its historiographical context, we speak to the work of others and acknowledge that our own work does, or will one day, receive similar scrutiny.

Who has been able to claim the title of historian, and who has not? Donald Wright has showed us how history professionalized as a discipline in the first decades of the twentieth century in ways that excluded women and normalized our near absence as somehow commonsensical.⁷⁹ Feminist scholars challenged the bundling of historian and male in a range of ways during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and they continue to do so.⁸⁰ Without denying the tenacity and palpable costs of sexism in who does historians’ work, under what conditions, and how it is valued and recognized, I think we can also note how transformative the feminist engagement with the historical profession has been. One measure of this is that I am the third woman to make this presidential address in a row, and will be followed by

another. I think it is fair to say that this would have been unimaginable in 1922, when the CHA/SHC was founded, or in 1963, when Hilda Neatby was the first woman to make this address.

The relationship between history as a discipline in Canada and Indigenous histories and scholarship is complicated, even fraught. Indigenous history, as a topic, received varying amounts of attention over the course of the twentieth century, and professional historians played their own role in the range of “political alliances” between settlers and Indigenous peoples that Joan Sangster discussed in her address of 2017.⁸¹ W.L. Morton, CHA/SHC president from 1959–1960 and then a professor at my own institution, the University of Manitoba, chaired the conference committee of the Winnipeg Indian and Métis Conference, working alongside other non-Indigenous people interested in community work.⁸² Things shifted in the 1970s, and especially in the 1980s and 1990s. The predecessor to the CHA/SHC’s affiliated organization, the Indigenous History Group, was founded in 1972. An examination of “major writings in Aboriginal History” between 1990 and 1999 concluded that more had been published in that decade than in the fifty years preceding.⁸³

This increasing engagement with Indigenous histories was not accompanied by a concomitant increase in the presence and visibility of Indigenous historians in Canadian history departments, or in the CHA/SHC. In 2009, McCallum noted that Indigenous history was “now considered a legitimate topic of historical labour,” yet Indigenous professional historians were “anomalies within it.”⁸⁴ The underrepresentation of racialized historians within History departments in Canada, and perhaps especially in Canadian history, is not reducible to the invisibility of Indigenous scholars, but it is not unconnected from it either. At the 2019 meetings, historian Afua Cooper reminded the audience of a session co-organized by the Black Canadian Studies Association and the CHA/SHC that Black scholars had been failed by Canada’s historical profession.⁸⁵ And nor are these questions separate from the naturalization of historical processes of exclusion and inclusion within historical scholarship, what historian Henry Yu calls the “narrative violence of telling stories about Canadian belonging that replicate the political accomplishments of white supremacy.”⁸⁶

The Canadian historical profession does not sit alone at this particular juncture. Frances Henry, Enakshi Dua, Carl James, Audrey Kobayaski, Peter Li, Howard Ramos and Malinda Smith’s 2017 study

shows that racialized and Indigenous scholars are significantly underrepresented in Canadian post-secondary institutions in general, and that this underrepresentation increased rather than decreased in the era of equity policies.⁸⁷ In 2018, the Royal Historical Society issued an evidence-based report on patterns of race, ethnicity, and equity in UK history, concluding that racial and ethnic inequality shapes who studies and teaches history, and their experiences of doing so.⁸⁸ In the wake of a 2017 conversation prompted by the publication of a review of Ansley Erickson’s study of school desegregation in Nashville, Tennessee — written by Raymond Wolters, a historian with a track record of publishing dubious discussions of race, immigration, and identity in an alt-right, white supremacist journal — the *American Historical Review* announced a series of editorial changes and a commitment to “decolonization.” The editor took responsibility for the “thinly disguised racist ‘dog whistle’” that saw print, and committed the journal to taking “the risk of confronting its own potential complicity in the inability of the profession to divest itself fully of its past lack of openness to scholars and scholarship due to race, color, creed, gender, sexuality, nationality, and a host of other assigned characteristics.”⁸⁹

For all these connections to other disciplines in Canada and to history elsewhere, the enduring underrepresentation of Indigenous and racialized scholars within the Canadian historical profession in general and the CHA/SHC in particular is ours alone, reflecting distinct histories of race, Indigeneity, and empire, and lineages of language, region, nation, and ways of recognizing and addressing them, or not. Conversations about how we might build a profession and organization that better reflects the multiple histories we analyze, the classrooms we teach in, and the audiences we speak and are responsible to have occurred tentatively and intermittently over the last decade, most recently around prizes and patterns of what scholarship is or is not celebrated.⁹⁰ These interventions too are necessary, and as a profession and a scholarly organization, historians can and must engage directly.

It is no surprise that when we begin with water and its colonial histories, we end with ourselves. Water is intimate, consequential. People have been dispossessed in the interests of water, and they have been dispossessed by it. Cities have been built through water, and communities imperilled and impoverished by it. People require water to

live, and especially to live well. There can be too little water, and too much water, as the quickening pace of climate change makes clearer. When we begin with and return to water we also return to the fact that all history, in one way or another, begins with the present, with the always changing and often difficult circumstances we research, write, and teach in, and directly or indirectly respond to. The case of Winnipeg and Shoal Lake 40 shows how this quintessential story of Canadian capitalism and modernity was produced and maintained through ongoing processes of dispossession, of land, of labour, and of resources, including water. If our analysis of modern Canada is not transformed by this recognition, we are surely doing it wrong. Likewise, if the historical profession is not itself reshaped by conversations promoted by critical race scholarship and Indigenous studies, we are missing an opportunity to reimagine the terms of our relationship to the past we study, the present our work must speak to, and the future we are part of making.

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