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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Seen but Not Seen: Final Thoughts

DONALD SMITH

What a pleasure it was to participate in the April 2023 virtual roundtable hosted by the Canadian Historical Association on *Seen but Not Seen: Influential Canadians and the First Nations from the 1840s to Today*. The generous comments of discussants Jan Noel and Hamar Foster were – and still are – warmly appreciated. My book might best be called a "sequential biography." I love biography as it humanizes the past. In *Seen but Not Seen*, I explore in chronological order the ideas and life stories of sixteen influential Canadians to narrate the history of Indigenous peoples' marginalization and to understand why non-Indigenous Canadians failed to recognize Indigenous societies and cultures as worthy of respect. To expand my study, I also included at least twenty other intriguing characters. My interest in the topic of the relationship between settlers and Indigenous peoples extends back over half a century, to my MA in Canadian history at the Université Laval in Quebec City, and my PhD at the University of Toronto.

History is continually being reinterpreted, conditioned by the assumptions of the time and the place where it is written. New facts are uncovered, new questions are asked, and new interpretations are advanced. As Jan Noel and Hamar Foster both emphasize, I attempt throughout *Seen but Not Seen* to understand people in their historical context, to reconstruct the atmosphere and mentality of their age, and to reveal their outlooks and situations. I try to avoid, as much as I can, what historians call "presentism," the judgment of the past uniquely through the lens of the present. As Foster notes, this caution about presentism "is not a plea for the suspension of judgement. It is rather a warning that the past is complex, and that context is important." The catastrophic impact of John A. Macdonald's Indigenous policies on the plains cannot escape comment.

The central reality of Canadian history to recent times is colonialism, a form of conquest in which a nation, in this case the newly formed Dominion of Canada, takes over a distant territory, introduces its own people, and controls and attempts to direct the Indigenous inhabitants. In the nineteenth century, Canadians had a worldview dramatically different from those of the early twenty-first century. As historian Christopher Moore reminds us, "In the years around Con-

federation, all Canadian politicians and all political parties endorsed the forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples."[1] In mid- and late nineteenth-century Canada, assimilation — or "cultural genocide" as it is commonly called today — and residential schools were the progressive views of the day. Assimilation was regarded as both the natural and desirable solution.

In writing my manuscript, I kept in mind the advice I received a mere forty-nine years ago in 1974 at the beginning of my university teaching career. The Rev. Enos Montour (1899–1984), a retired United Church minister and a member of the Delaware First Nations community on the Six Nations Territory in Ontario, kindly read and commented on a draft of my PhD thesis on the history of the nineteenth-century Mississauga First Nations on the north shore of Lake Ontario. Generously, he said that he liked what I had written but then calmly advised that, for readability, I should "put more raisins in the dough."

Additional invaluable advice about writing followed several months later in December 1974. Lovat Dickson (1902-1983), Grey Owl's publisher in England in the mid-1930s, had returned to Canada following his retirement from Macmillan in the late 1960s. The distinguished publisher and noted author who managed the literary affairs of the Macmillan publishing empire for over two decades also read a draft of my thesis and imparted a second life-long lesson about good writing. While his overall opinion of the draft was "favourable," Dickson added, in his words, his "usual complaint": "You pile in everything if it is the result of research. This is often repetitious, and repeating it loses its effect."

Five decades after obtaining those two most helpful writing tips I received a letter, dated August 31, 2021. "Dr. Smith, I am almost finished *Seen but Not Seen*. It doesn't seem appropriate to say that one enjoys such a testimony to racism, blindness, and injustice; but I do find the book captivating reading." Bull's eye! This note indicates that, in my last full academic study, I had successfully mastered the advice of Enos Montour and Lovat Dickson!

In 1971, I published my first academic article in Canadian history in *Ontario History*, the journal of the Ontario Historical Society (OHS). It was on Grey Owl. My ties with the OHS have remained close ever since. Indeed, Rob Leverty, then the executive director of the OHS, wanted to host the Toronto book launch of *Seen but Not Seen* in the OHS's historic John McKenzie House in Willowdale, in

North York. But the one historical truth that all members of our noble profession all solemnly accept intervened, and that is, you cannot predict the future! The outbreak of the horrible COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, less than a year before the publication of the book, totally obliterated that plan.

During the late summer of 2021, with COVID still very much at large, Rob Leverty and I began to discuss a follow-up to *Seen but Not Seen.* Within a few months a new project had taken shape: a limited series podcast consisting of sketches of approximately twenty historical figures in Canada whom I had researched in depth over half a century. The weekly series, *In Hindsight*, follows the model of old-fashioned radio in its relaxed, accessible focus on different personalities in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canadian history. Wearing a set of headphones in Calgary, under the extremely capable direction of OHS project manager and librarian Sarah McCabe in Toronto, I began recording weekly episodes in January 2023. The accompanying written reports for each episode took several days each to compose. The regular series ended in June 2023. Episode 21, the final wrap up of the series, was posted at the end of the summer. It reviews the ways in which the research and writing in Canadian history have changed in our lifetimes.[2]

The two introductory episodes review my transformation from a student of international affairs into a historian of Canada with a particular interest in Indigenous Peoples. Eighteen episodes follow, from the late eighteenth century to today. I select the "best of the catch" of my personal research discoveries in Canadian history, both before and after my arrival in Alberta from Ontario in 1974. Because most of my research was conducted well before the availability of electronic tools, I wanted to re-create the excitement of visiting the locales of my nineteenth- and twentieth-century subjects and meeting their descendants in person. I wanted to convey the thrill of reading in archives the unpublished records, the letters, notebooks, and diaries, actual handwriting.

Illustrated summary articles, roughly 3,000 to 3,500 words long, accompany each twenty to thirty-five-minute episode. Available on the OHS website, the episodes include a short backstory on how each "discovery" was made. My old friends take a final bow: Grey Owl, Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, Honoré Jaxon, his nemesis Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, Kahkewaquonaby (Peter Jones) and Eliza Jones, their niece Nahnebahwequa ("Nahnee") and Onondeyoh

(Fred Loft), among other favourite characters. At least one striking illustration (a painting, a drawing, or a photo) is included in the electronic version of each episode, with a paragraph-long bibliography of useful books and articles. Several important historical figures not included in *Seen but Not Seen,* as either major characters or as walk-ons, now appear. To mention two, Egerton Ryerson, the individual who developed Ontario's system of universal, compulsory tax-supported education, now appears. Secondly, former prime minister Lester Pearson (1963-1968), Canada's greatest diplomat and the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957, now obtains full coverage.

What's next for documentary historians of Indigenous Canada? A major challenge is the explosion of popular and academic interest. The shift was well underway even before the 2015 Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its 94 Calls to Action added momentum to the interest in Indigenous issues. The number and complexity of the issues themselves is daunting. To select but one example, the current work in the legal world to implement in Canada the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples represents an enormous challenge. A new era has begun. Recently, a close friend, a fellow Canadian historian involved with contemporary issues, said to me, "You need a law degree to follow Indigenous rights today."

Where do we go from here? There is no simple answer, something historian Olive Dickason (1920-2011) — who is featured in episode 20 of *In Hindsight* — understood. In 1992, her signature book appeared: *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times*.[3] In 1993, it won the Canadian Historical Association's Sir John A. Macdonald Book Prize, now the Canadian Historical Association's Best Scholarly Book in Canadian History Prize. *Canada's First Nations* is an extraordinary book, concisely summarizing the latest historical academic scholarship on the Indigenous peoples in the late twentieth century. Dickason's documentation rested on the widest possible search of the available primary and secondary sources, placing her study in the mainstream of academic scholarship. She herself recognized that the book's framework remained European, as Indigenous perspectives at this point "wouldn't be understood. It is too big a leap."[4] Indeed, Dickason knew exactly the limitations of her traditional historical approach to Indigenous history. For First Nations, she explained, "this land was the land of their origins, and their myths, with their metaphoric descriptions of the genesis of humans and the present world, are many and varied; their different perceptions of time

and nature place these tales at another level of reality than that of this work."[5]

To this end, Indigenous Studies is an exciting area at the university level. Indigenous perspectives are essential. At great cost, the First Nations peoples have survived the pressures of colonization. Overall, the Canadian academy has begun to welcome Indigenous knowledge and world views. Governments and universities have made millions of dollars available in funding to bridge the significant gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous research steams, although things are far from perfect, especially for Indigenous women.[6]

Independently, both Jan Noel and Hamar Foster noticed my joy concerning new perceptions in non-Indigenous Canada of Canada's First Nations. And both cite a passage from the epilogue: "For me the good news is, over the course of my three-quarters of a century in this country, I now see a growing political, regional, and public awareness of Indigenous Canada." How do we encourage and foster that awareness which is so essential to reconciliation? Again, there is no simple answer. But in Jan's words, "we can take an honest look at the problematic past, while pointing also towards the light."

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Endnotes

1 Christopher Moore, "Finding Reconciliation," *Canada's History* 100, no. 6 (December 2020/January 2021): 36. See also Christopher Moore, *Three Weeks in Quebec City: The Meeting That Made Canada* (Toronto: Penguin Random House, 2015).

2 For an episode list of *In Hindsight*, see https://ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/podcasts/in-hindsight/.

3 Olive Patricia Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992). Dickason published two subsequent editions in 1997 and 2002.

4 Olive Dickason quoted in Darren R. Préfontaine, *Changing Canadian History. The Life and Works of Olive Patricia Dickason* (Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2022), 203

5 Dickason, *Canada's First Nations*, 21

6 Merelda Fiddler-Potter, "Is the Academy a Safe Place for Indigenous Women and Our Knowledge," *Globe and Mail*, March 25, 2023.