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# *Whose Shared History?*

**Kiera L. Ladner and Michael McCrossan**

On 11 June 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an historic apology to former students of Indian residential schools. While the Prime Minister should certainly be commended for his role in addressing this dark "chapter" in Canadian history, we must not forget that the apology was part of a larger settlement addressing Indian residential schools. In his remarks offered on behalf of "all Canadians," Prime Minister Harper apologized for the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse suffered by former students and for the intergenerational effects caused by a policy of assimilation. The words spoken by the Prime Minister that day continue to resonate with profound and emotional cadences. Invoking the language of "healing" and "reconciliation," the Prime Minister called for a "new beginning" based upon knowledge of "our shared history." For many Indigenous people, however, the words spoken in the apology do not accurately represent their experience with colonialism and Canada's history as a settler society.

The narrative of the Canadian nation offered by the Prime Minister is one that selectively omits a history of genocide, territorial dispossession, cultural destruction, and regime replacement in favour of a rendering of history which represents Canada as a primarily British settler society – one whose past includes a discreet chapter containing the consequences of policies with "lasting and damaging impacts." In his admiration for Canada as a British settler society, the Prime Minister continually forgets that Canada is itself a settler society, allowing him to view residential schools as an isolated event. In his remarks at a press conference during a meeting of the G20 in Pittsburgh in 2009, the Prime Minister said the following about the history of Canada:

> We are a very large country … we have one of the longest-standing democratic regimes, unbroken democratic regimes, in history. We are one of the most stable regimes in history. There are very few countries that can say for nearly 150 years they've had the same political system without any social breakdown, political upheaval or invasion. We are unique in that regard. We also have no history of colonialism. So we have all of the things that many people admire about the great powers, but none of the things that threaten or bother them about the great powers.
>
> We also are a country, obviously beginning with our two major cultures, but also a country formed by people from all over the world that is able to speak cross-culturally in a way few other countries are able to do at international forums.[1]

1. See Aaron Wherry, "What he was talking about when he talked about colonialism," *Macleans*, 1 October 2009, http://www2.macleans.ca/2009/10/01/what-he-was-talking-about-when-he-talked-about-colonialism/.

While the Prime Minister could have been referring to a history of colonialism beyond Canada's territorial waters, it must be remembered that Canada began as a country that actively engaged in colonialism within its own borders as it continued to expand westward and northward, disposing Indigenous peoples of their territories and continuing the same policy trajectory as its Imperial counterparts. The Prime Minister's description of the country as originating from "two major cultures" fails to acknowledge the multiplicity of Indigenous nations whose territories Canada now claims as its own. This not only ignores the territories possessed by Indigenous peoples and their relationships with the Crown, but also the shared and intersecting histories they have with those two cultures and the many others that have since arrived. Beyond their denial of Canada's history as a colonizing nation, Prime Minister Harper's remarks are also problematic as they engage in the production of national myths which not only exclude the violence and political upheaval embedded within the Canadian state but also the corresponding Indigenous resistances that continue to occur. We must not forget that Canada has actively engaged in multiple acts of regime replacement under the Indian Act. Many such acts have been extremely violent and have led not only to the imprisonment of Indigenous leaders, but also, in at least one instance, execution, which was the fate of Jake Fire in 1899.

Perhaps the most emblematic representation of Prime Minister Harper's approach to history can be observed in his reification of Canada as a settler society unified under the constitutional legacy of the British Crown. This vision can be seen in Canada's celebration of both the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the War of 1812. The celebrations of these events could be read not only as ignoring the claims of Québec, but also as denying Indigenous nationhood and Indigenous sovereignty. Such discursive sleights of hand are exceedingly troubling as they privilege a colonial interpretation of the past which suggests that there has been a unilateral assertion of Crown sovereignty while simultaneously denying Indigenous treaty relationships and interactions with the Crown. While Indigenous people have been acknowledged as British "allies" in the War of 1812, the singular focus on the American invasion misrepresents Indigenous involvement and their alliances with the Crown. By focusing on these moments as uniquely "Canadian" vignettes, the Prime Minister has missed an opportunity to explore what is perhaps the most pivotal moment in "our shared history."

The event which should be commemorated is the 250th anniversary of the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and the ratification of the Treaty of Niagara the following year. These are pivotal events in our shared history for they are the events which allowed for the sharing of the Indigenous territories now known as "Canada." While the Royal Proclamation is typically viewed as a unilateral declaration of Crown sovereignty and an attempt to deal with "the Québec problem," such an understanding is both misleading and historically inaccurate. As scholars such as John Borrows and Peter Russell remind us,

the historical significance of the Royal Proclamation does not culminate in 1763, but instead must be understood in relation to the treaty negotiations at Niagara involving some two thousand Indigenous leaders who represented nations throughout the Americas. This treaty set forth an agreement in principle which would allow for the sharing of select Indigenous lands while also maintaining, recognizing, and affirming the sovereignty of all nations (both settler and Indigenous) and the entrenchment of legal and constitutional pluralism.

The prime minister is not alone in omitting these events from his narrative of history. Historical amnesia is prevalent. However, despite the fact that these two events are commonly misunderstood, they truly represent our shared history. The Royal Proclamation and the subsequent Treaty of Niagara put forth a vision of Canada that must be remembered. As foundational constitutional documents these represent a framework for political and legal reconciliation which to this day provides for the territorial existence of British North America and the subsequent legitimacy of the Canadian state. If *our* history is to be "shared," then the narrative offered by the Prime Minister on behalf of "all Canadians" must more accurately reflect the sharing between nations and the agreement reached at Niagara.