

A Treaty Guide for Torontonians by Talking Treaties Collective

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A Treaty Guide for Torontonians

by Talking Treaties Collective

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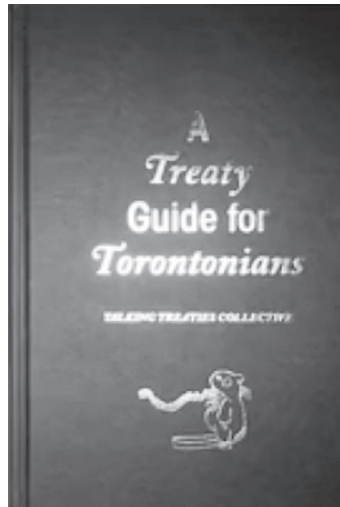
In writing the history of Canada, many historians have made the mistake of implying that the arrival of Europeans in North America signified an inevitable fall-out of Indigenous nations in the wake of far more “advanced” European colonizers. In most of these early histories, Indigenous peoples were treated as a ‘dying race’—their political structures, epistemologies, and languages, would be replaced with “civilization” and “progress,” if not by their own will, then by force. This, of course, is always in the context that Canada was more equitable in its treatment towards Indigenous peoples compared to the United States, that treaties were signed, and Indigenous peoples ‘willingly’ ceded their rights to the lands in exchange for monetary payments and reserves.¹

While later historians recognized that Canada did indeed act *dishonourably* in its relations with Indigenous peoples, new students are still led to believe that Indigenous peoples lost their lands and resources and that today, the return of stolen wealth would infringe upon Canadian notions of sovereignty. In these narratives, it is generally implied that there is still more “progress” to be made to promote the equality of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples under Canadian law, but that historical wrongs can be rec-

onciled with through the use of national apologies, land claims settlements and (most recently) land acknowledgements.²

A Treaty Guide for Torontonians presents an alternative view by giving readers the tools to reimagine the role treaties could—and still can—play in creating a world of co-existence and mutual respect between Indigenous nations and Canadians in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The book positions treaties not only as agreements of the past, but as continual relationships that can be renewed, honoured, and implemented by Torontonians in support and understanding of Indigenous sovereignty and decolonizing efforts. While it does not present itself exclusively as a history book, or a larger examination of Indigenous-settler relations in Canada, it does add substantial weight to most existing histories of the GTA through its emphasis on the role of treaties in shaping the City of Toronto.³

The book’s lead authors, Ange Loft, Victoria Freeman, Martha Stiegman and Jill Carter powerfully use not only a historical narrative, but a number of engaging activities and striking illustrations (drawn by Kaia’tanó:ron Dumoulin Bush and Karis Jones-Pard) to promote a holistic treaty-learning experience that is meant to provoke the reader to consider their thoughts, feelings and opinions, while



also encouraging present and future steps towards action and stewardship.

The book is organized into seven “layers” —each adding context to the next, for the very complex and daunting task of explaining the role treaties have played in forming notions of Canadian sovereignty in the GTA. The first layer illustrates the nature of mutually-beneficial treaties in the pre-contact period by presenting examples of early alliances between Anishinaabe, Wendat and Haudenosaunee nations. This discussion is then extended to early treaties made with Europeans, highlighting that newcomers were required to adhere to Indigenous laws and treaty-making practices upon their arrival in North America. Layer two puts a face to one of the most widely-cited treaty in Toronto land acknowledgements: the Dish with One Spoon. In this section, readers learn about Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee relations to the land, and whether or not non-Indigenous peoples are part of this agreement. The authors make clear that treaties like the Dish with One Spoon are continual, living agreements, subject to renewal and reinterpretation. What the treaty may have meant in the eighteenth century may be entirely different today, and readers are encouraged to think about its meaning in both the past and the present, as well as the future.

Layer three examines treaties signed between Great Britain and Indigenous nations after the Fall of New France, starting with the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and the Treaty of Niagara in 1764. The treaties presented in this layer (which recognized

the continual sovereignty of Indigenous nations) is contrasted in the following layer by the so-called “land cessions” used to legitimize settler claims to the GTA. The fifth layer follows with an examination of the further removal of the Mississaugas of the Credit from their homelands.

The final two layers summarize other infringements on Indigenous landholdings and political autonomy, and mark important developments towards resurgence and activism from Indigenous nations and their allies. The activities in these layers may provide some of the most important learning experiences because they offer specific examples for non-Indigenous readers to take accountability for the past with affirmative action. This includes imagining what treaty renewal would look like or considering how lands might be reappropriated in the present. While such discussions are usually outside of the scope of most history books, in the context of honouring treaties as continual agreements, this is extremely fitting.

A Treaty Guide for Torontonians is a beautifully-crafted book, well-suited for classrooms, community collectives, or really anyone who is interested in reading an up-to-date, well-researched history of treaties in Toronto. It is an excellent addition to the fields of Canadian history, histories of Toronto, and treaty education.

Elizabeth McKenzie

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¹ For a critique of this in the context of Toronto, see Victoria Freeman, “Toronto Has No History!” *Urban History Review* 38:2 (Spring 2010), 21-35.

² This may be considered an exaggerated summary, but consider the words of Chelsea Vowel, “The Myth of Progress,” and “The Myth of the Level Playing Field,” In *Indigenous Writes* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Highwater Press, 2016), 233-34; this narrative is evident in Peter A Baskerville’s *Ontario: Image, Identity and Power* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2002): 216-18.

³ For example, in J.M.S. Careless’s *Toronto to 1918: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., 1984) only the Toronto Purchase is mentioned, and even then, it is referred to as a “bargain-basement deal,” 11.