A Stó:lō Coast Salish Historical Atlas
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A Stó:lō Coast Salish Historical Atlas

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FOREWORD

Just a few years ago I went to meet with the mayor of Chilliwack, because city workmen had come onto our reserve at Skowkale to build a flood control device and widen the interception ditch. Our reserve is only 66 hectares, and it has one of Chilliwack’s main roads running through it. The city wanted to dig a drainage ditch for the people who were living in a housing subdivision opposite our reserve. The city sent big trucks and heavy equipment to haul dirt off of our reserve and dumped it on an adjacent farmer’s land. I was the chief at the time, and I went up and put my arms out and stopped the trucks and asked, “What are you guys doing?” To which they replied, “Well, we are moving dirt because we have to build this ditch.” And I said, “Who said you could do that?” The driver answered, “Well, the City.” I said, “You can’t do that.” He responded, “We take our orders from the city engineer, so you’ll have to talk to him.” So I went to speak with the city engineer and he said, “I can’t help you. We take our instructions from the mayor. You’ll have to talk to him.” So I asked, “Where is the heck is the mayor?” He said, “He’s over there having a meeting.” They were having their council meeting that night and they were all sitting around. Mayor Simpson was a rather stout guy with not much hair. He was a nice enough fellow and he let me come into the meeting. I said, “Mr. Mayor, I have a question for you. Why are you hauling dirt off of Skowkale Indian Reserve? Don’t you know that it’s federal Crown land held in trust for Indian people and it’s not within the District of Chilliwack’s jurisdiction? It’s not even within provincial jurisdiction. You have no authority coming onto our reserve. Don’t you know that we have a band office with a telephone? You can call me or write me a letter – I’m the chief. Why didn’t you ask? I wouldn’t do that to your city. What are you doing?” He looked at me and then asked, “What do you want?” I thought, “What do I want? How about a little respect? You can’t come onto your neighbour’s property and begin hauling out dirt without some sort of authority.” Then, as though we Aboriginals were invisible, he asked, “Well, how many Indians do we have around here anyway? Who are they?” In his mind, we didn’t even exist; that’s how far we had been marginalized. Not just physically marginalized onto small reserves but mentally marginalized from people’s minds. I remember listening to Judge Campbell lecture at the University of Saskatchewan. He was talking about the times that he was in contact with Aboriginal people as a judge in the city of Duncan. If you have ever been to criminal court (and as a lawyer and now a provincial judge, I have been to criminal court many times), you will know what I am talking about. Monday morning is busy at the courthouse. That is the morning when, as an Indian, you can meet your relatives and neighbours. They are all there. Some of them are there with their kids, meeting others in the hallways. It’s all Indians on Monday morning, and Friday is the same – those are Indian days. Seeing all those Native faces makes you wonder whether the police arrest anybody else. Judge Campbell said an interesting thing in his lecture. “You know, I have lived in the city all of my life, I have driven by the Cowichan community all of my life as I go to work. Yet the only time that I have come into contact with Aboriginal people is when they come in front of me charged with something and I have to send them away.” He said, “I don’t know the Cowichan people.”

I remember the year before I entered high school – Grade 7. In Grade 7 you have a lot of friends and a lot of people are good to you. You play Lone Ranger: one day you are Tonto and the next you play the masked man. In Grade 7, though, kids become aware of differences. I can remember one of my friends coming up to me and saying, “I can’t play with you anymore.” I asked, “Why?” He said, “Because my mom says I can’t play with you anymore.” And he never did. He never sat with me on the bus, he never walked home with me any more, we never played marbles again. That is where it begins – this wall that is built up between people. I remember walking into an elevator when I used to have really long hair, and a little girl chinned and dove behind her mother, saying “An Indian, ahh!” On another occasion, a friend and I were sitting at a bus depot and these people came up to us and said, “We have never seen Indians before. Could we take your picture?” Well, why not? I replied, “Go ahead.” The woman was so happy to take our picture that she gave us each a nickel. Five cents – as if that was going to get us a meal that day. I wondered, did she think we were starving Indians and that she was helping us? I threw the nickel away.

Do you know what it is like to be an Indian? I saw a film in a psychology course while I was at university. It was about racism. Half a class of students were black and the other half did not. The kids with collars were designated the bad kids – no good, not worth anything, lazy, stupid – in every way different from the kids without collars. The film documented the behavioural changes of the kids with collars. They start hanging their heads down. They start acting up and being bad. They do not want the collar on any more. The kids without collars snicker: “Ha, ha, look at you kids! You are bad, you have a collar on!” They point fingers at them, they throw things at them, and they laugh.

As an Aboriginal person, I have had a collar on my whole life. There were times when I prayed to have it taken off. It kills me when my kids come home and tell me that they do not want to be Native. This is what we have to live with in our own country. We have not only been marginalized physically, but also psychologically and emotionally. A great man from the United States once said, “You can’t break a man’s leg one day and blame him for limping the next.” Is it our fault that we drink too much, our fault that we are poor, our fault that we are in jail more than anyone else? People come up to me and say, “Why are we giving all of these Indians all of these services? Why don’t they pay taxes like everyone else? There should be one law for all. Let’s have some equality around here. This isn’t right!” When I hear these things I think, “My God, if we had only had equality since the time Aboriginal people met Europeans, then maybe we would still be people in our own eyes and not ‘Indians.’”

Is the treaty process going to give us back our dignity? As a lawyer, I encountered a lot of people who came into my office and said, “Look, Steven, somebody hit me with their car and left the scene of the accident. They’ve left me maimed, my memory is gone, and I can’t eat or sleep at night. I really want to get that person. I want to go to court and I want to get back at them.” That is justice – or at least it is a common conception of justice. Then you prepare, get them ready, take their evidence, and write down all of the case history. You dress them up, bring them to court, and the other party comes in and they say, “Let’s settle.” Your client says, “No, I want my day in court. I want justice.”

When I look at young Aboriginal people in the street today and talk to them, I find they don’t even know what is wrong with them. All they know is that they do not like who they are, they are angry, they are poor, and they are a minority in a country that treats them as though they get privileges that others do not. Well, I’m tired of apologizing for being Aboriginal.

As someone who has been placed in a leadership role, I think to myself, if we set up readiochets and start pounding on people, is that going to resolve things? Is that what will bring a better way of life? Look at other parts of the world – Northern Ireland, Liberia, Bosnia and other areas where there is violence. There isn’t a country in the world that does not have a litany of violence in its history. The Scots, for one, have never forgotten what the English did to them. Violence begets violence.

Do you know what they are trying to do to us Natives in court? As Aboriginal people, first we have to prove that we are the descendants of the “real” Aboriginal people. Then we have to prove that we were here first – that we were here even here.
thinking, “Who the heck are you?” He said, “You taught me history when I was in Grade 11.”

The Stoól are developing government structures and negotiating them into a treaty. An Elders council has been formed. People say to me, “What’s an Elder?” I tell them if you wake up in the morning and your teeth are in a glass, you are an Elder. I am only teasing, of course. It has to do with knowledge, respect, wisdom and love— that is an Elder. There is also a council of Stoól chiefs. In the old days leaders were referred to as siyám. The term is seeing a revival. It takes a lifetime to earn that title but only a minute to lose it. There is a Stoól council of youth as well. These things are together called the Stoól Government House. Some of the Elders and some of the chiefs are also part of a Council of Justice and are developing a Stoól police force and a justice program. This is necessary because we know that the justice system does not work for Aboriginal people. There must be other ways of dealing with deviant behaviour. The deputy chief commissioner of the RCMP in the province of British Columbia is very interested in supporting the development of an Aboriginal police force. We call it a “peacekeeping force,” though—people who can help solve community problems.

Our Stoól Government House is built on Aboriginal values. One of the strongest values we have is humility. When a siyám walks into a gathering, he automatically sits in the back, if the others invite him to sit in the front, then he moves. That is humility. I watch Canadian politicians and I wonder if they have ever heard of that principle. Our leaders are expected to serve the people and be there for them. Our values and our systems are not European. However, the more I study Europeans and the more I learn about my own history, the more I find that in fact we are the same. You love your Elders, you love your God, you cherish your young people, and you have a strong sense of justice, just as we do. In fact, if you look long and hard enough, you will find that there are probably more similarities than there are differences. This historical atlas represents a significant attempt to bridge those differences, to build cross-cultural understanding, and to establish respect. We have both paid too much attention to the differences between us, and I want to see that change. I hope that you do, too.

XWELIXWELTE

The Honourable Judge Steven L. Point, former Stoól Nation Tewal Siyám
Aboriginal organizations, especially larger ones with the financial resources to sustain interdisciplinary teams of researchers, can be hotbeds of academic research and dynamic forums for the melding of indigenous and western ways of knowing. All too frequently, however, this intellectual energy culminates in obscure, seldom-referenced reports found on bookshelf shelves and in tribal council archives. There are good reasons for keeping research findings in such formats. Often the information is of a sensitive nature. Often there is a fear, derived from a long history of betrayal at government hands, of how outsiders might use or misuse such information. That certain Aboriginal leaders and community members are now encouraging popular and academic works about their community’s cultural history indicates a growing sense of confidence within First Nations communities. It also marks a shift toward a more balanced power relationship between Aboriginal and non-Native society. The fact that Aboriginal leaders are encouraging publications that discuss not merely accounts of Aboriginal-European relations, but also the dynamics and tensions within and between Aboriginal communities and people (over which there is no consensus of opinion or clear “good guy/bad guy” relationships) reflects a decolonization of thought processes. This new openness also exemplifies a reassessment of older cultural values and protocols, which call for a multiplicity of opinions on a host of topics to be shared publicly and openly discussed or debated.

Such is the spirit in which this historical atlas was produced. It is an example of “work” in the classic Coast Salish sense (the public sharing of important information relating to changing roles, status and associated relationships), conducted by a community of joined individuals—in this instance not a “family,” but members of Stó:lō Nation’s Aboriginal Rights and Title (AR&T) department and a few of their sáyá:yé (friends).

The decision to produce this atlas was made at a Stó:lō Nation AR&T department meeting in the spring of 1999. During a discussion of annual work plans, it was noted that many research findings from previous projects were generally inaccessible to staff and managers in other Stó:lō Nation departments. In particular, there was increasing demand from the Xyólhémeylth Health and Family Services programs, the Community Development department (especially their education division) and the Fisheries department to access information produced by AR&T for use in a host of outreach programs and administrative restructuring initiatives. Similar requests for information, with different motives, were also regularly being made by outside agencies such as the provincial ministries of Forestry, Parks, Energy, Mines and Resources, Heritage, and Education. Perhaps most importantly, an ever-increasing number of Stó:lō community members were requesting that staff visit their band offices or homes to make presentations on aspects of Stó:lō culture and history.

The staff archaeologist, historian, cultural advisor, environmental planners, archivist, research associates and geographical information systems technicians were spending more time conducting workshops and making presentations than developing and analysis. A new publication was seen as a way of making a broad range of information available to a wide spectrum of people. The format of a historical atlas was chosen as the most effective medium for communicating our research findings (although, as readers will discover, the word “atlas” perhaps does not go quite far enough to describe the scope and nature of all the information presented). The atlas form offered the best way of presenting a body of cultural information in a manner accessible and palatable to Stó:lō community members, who continue to prefer oral and visual communication over written text. Yet its wonderfully flexible format still allowed for accompanying text and analytical discussions. Our manager and department executive director, Clarence (Kat) Pennier, identified the atlas as a powerful educational tool with application to ongoing Stó:lō Nation treaty negotiations. To ensure that the atlas served this function, he assigned an 18-month publication deadline (and, although the atlas was a departmental priority, it was not to seriously interfere with or displace other ongoing staff commitments). Outside of establishing this deadline, Kat and the other leaders of Stó:lō Nation refrained from any interference in the work’s contents or presentation. The chief carrying the portfolio for our department, Lester Ned, defined our mandate simply and directly as “Tell us what we need to hear, not what we want to hear.” Chief Ned’s statement reflects the degree to which this work is meant to inform and educate Aboriginal and non-Native audiences alike. Its purpose is to create a bridge of understanding between cultures rather than to speak or lecture across cultural divides.

An editorial board was established to determine the atlas’s content and to evaluate each plate as the authors created them. There were no Aboriginal politicians on this board, although consultation with members of the Stó:lō leadership was regular and ongoing. Each member of the editorial board was responsible for ensuring that the atlas’s content met the standards of the intellectual community with which they were affiliated. Thus, the board consisted of a cultural advisor, a historian, an archaeologist, an environmental planner, an archivist and a geographical information systems specialist. Editorial board meetings were periodically attended by Stó:lō individuals who, though not formally a part of the process, expressed an interest in what we were doing. They were welcomed and encouraged to participate in discussions. Some of the most profound insights and suggestions came from Elizabeth Herrling and Rosaleen George, the team of fluent Halkíemelóm-speaking Elders who met weekly with the atlas’s cultural advisor, Albert (Sonny) McHalsie and from the collective energies of the Lulem’a Yel Seyokwe (the official Stó:lō Nation House of Elders, who have responsibility under the Stó:lō Nation constitution for cultural matters), for whom Sonny also arranged various meetings with individual authors and with the editorial board as a whole.

Although every effort has been made to present information in an accurate and respectful manner, not all readers will agree with everything they find between the covers of this atlas. That is as it must be, for there has never been a single definitive voice in either Aboriginal or non-Native historical discourse. As editors and authors of this publication, we echo and endorse the sentiments of the Stó:lō Nation managers, Elders and political leaders in encouraging others to publish new information and interpretations to challenge or build upon the material presented here.