

Inconveniently Yours

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Thomas King. *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. 287 pp.

Thomas King's book was released shortly before the final Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings held in Edmonton (March, 2014) and more recently, in Ottawa (June, 2015), at which survivors of Canada's Indian Residential Schools recounted abuse, suffering and hardship (1). In ten chapters, King's *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* provides a succinct but deep genealogy of the maltreatment of North American Indigenous peoples.

The first chapter, "Forget Columbus" provides a brief but illuminating history of massacres, genocides, and other unwanted truths. King's cultural anthropology pursues how one society can attempt to vanquish another, and then translate that near annihilation into a pleasant story, a romantic novel, or a celebrated by skewed history that overlooks any atrocities committed. As tour-guide, King contrasts Indigenous accounts, with histories generated by non-Indigenous colonists. One could consider the story of the Lone Ranger replete with the questionable characterization of his native companion "Tonto," as compared to King's skewering of that story in his own novel, *Green Grass Running Water*. King explains how self-congratulating legends that purport to value life have greater cultural currency. Consequently, historical and pop-cultural versions of the past perpetuate cultural stereotypes that overlook brutalities that were committed against native peoples. In spite of distorted histories, King still recalls the North West Rebellion, Batoche, or Little Big Horn. King goes on to reveal how the Thanatotically inspired U.S. government has continued to pursue similar aggressions abroad in sites such as in the Bay of Pigs, Phnom Pen, and Baghdad (25).

The second chapter, "The End of the Trail" analyses myths surrounding the purported demise of North American Indigenous peoples. The inconvenient truth is that Indigenous peoples remain among us, but the invented myths are strong. King notes Hollywood's preference for dead Indians over live ones. He tracks representations of Indigenous people through various Hollywood clichés that serve as substitutes for verité. King provides a genealogical trace of cultural history by considering novels such as James Fennimore Cooper's *Deerslayer*, or John Richardson's *Tecumseh* (28-30). He considers how U.S. coins, postage stamps, and paper currency misrepresent

native culture. He observes that in Hollywood, two types of “Indians” are portrayed, the “blood thirsty,” and the “noble savage” (34). Typically, both types are dying. The signification of “dead Indians” as cultural stereotype is revealed in expanded form as a massive simulacrum, re-duplicating a Romanticized predilection for lost cultures. Re-writings of history are typical of dominant societies that would prefer to erase the unpleasant facts of imperial aggression, but inconvenient names like Louis Riel, George Custer, Gabriel Dumont, Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse endure. King takes time to remind us of important cultural figures, such as comedy and film legend, Will Rogers (Cherokee), and Jay Silverheels, who played Tonto on the television show, *The Lone Ranger*, explaining that “Rogers was an Indian who didn’t get to play Indians, and Jay Silverheels, an Indian who only played Indians” (44). As such, neither Rogers nor Silverheels were perceived as worthy role models. King also turns to more recent successes lauding film and stage actors such as Graham Greene (Oneida), and Gary Farmer (Cayuga), among others. He reminds us of directors who make important documentaries, including Phil Lucas (Choctaw), and Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki). King’s lengthy lists of individuals and historical incidents are invaluable, and provide crucial groundwork for anyone curious enough to investigate further.

The third chapter, “Too Heavy to Lift,” outlines two massive governmental agendas, the first aimed at isolating Indigenous peoples on reservations, the second aimed at assimilating them and white-washing their cultural heritage. King notes that the Residential school system was coupled with broader forced removal, displacement, and relocation of native peoples. Accompanying this agenda is a history of broken treaties with the Metis of Ste. Madelaine in Manitoba, the Mi’kmaq in Nova Scotia, Inuit at Hebro, the Nutak in Labrador, the Sayisi Dene in Manitoba, not to mention violations involving the Aishihik, Champagne, White River, Ross River, and Pelly River in the Yukon; Gwa’Sala and ‘Nakwaxda’xw of B.C.; Mushuau Innu of Davis Inlet, among others, all arising out a governmental policy aimed at “appropriating” aboriginal land (91-93). King account raises questions concerning language and rhetoric. He notes that the term “appropriate;” often acts as a euphemism for “steal.” King documents further displacements across North America aimed at making room for hydroelectric projects that destroyed hunting and fishing resources, flooded villages and sacred sites, and forced further relocations among Indigenous communities at the Missouri River, Churchill Falls, Grande River, Kemano, Cheslatta, Grand Rapids, Chemawamin, Glen Canyon, and Columbia River, among others (93). These displacements were part of “Plan A,” aimed at annihilation.

Chapter 5, “We are sorry,” moves deeper into “Plan B,” aimed at assimilation, and excavates the horrid truths concerning overcrowding, physical abuse, poor clothing, malnutrition, rape, murder, tuberculosis, child labour, and mass deaths in the Residential school system, all stemming from in an effort to “kill the Indian and save

the man” through religion. We are reminded that Duncan Campbell Scott, then Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs, noted an average mortality rate at Residential schools of 30%, and a higher mortality rate in Alberta at 50%, only to dismiss those deaths as part of the “final solution of our Indian Problem” (114). Echoes of the Nazi annihilation of Jews in World War Two resonate. King’s data in this chapter and throughout the book is extremely well researched. For example, he cites the 1926 “Meriam Report” in the USA which reveals abuses of native rights, and the much later Canadian Hawthorne Report (1966) which blames natives for their own financial malaise, claiming they failed to take advantage of nearby resources. Assimilation through religion and education ultimately failed as part of “Plan B.” Meantime, some 150,000 native children ended up at residential schools, and nearly 50% lost their lives there. King curiously asks what reactions there would be if such deaths happened in suburban inner city schools across Canada (120-21). The litany of half-hearted apologies from religious groups and governmental bodies following these massive systemic failures belie sincerity in face of the reality of these histories.

The sixth chapter, “Like Cowboys and Indians,” covers native resistance in reaction to the ongoing “abrogation” of treaties across North America (134). King contextualizes these struggles against a backdrop that includes his personal experiences of protests against the Viet Nam War, peace rallies, Expo 67, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the Chicago Convention, Montreal separatist riots, N. Scott Momady winning the Pulitzer Prize and the American Indian Movement’s (AIM) engagement at Wounded Knee. He traces early organizations that eventually lead to the Assembly of First Nations, and observes that by 1990 most of AIM’s activists were either in jail or had their lives destroyed by governmental sanctions. King rationalizes AIM’s compulsion to make demands, instead of waiting for “blind justice” to make a “fair” decision that would never happen. King contends that waiting for justice is too often “A fool’s game” (158).

Chapter 7, “Forget About It,” turns to the next phase in dominant cultural attitudes that would prefer to forget the past. Here, I turn to my own subject-position (Latvian-Canadian) and to note that the attempted erasure of the past is common practice among imperial nations. Political analyst, Henry Meyer (2007) notes that the Russian Federation prefers erasing the Gulag Archipelago from its history even though a minimum of 20 million died in the Gulag, but current Russian history books which are required reading for Federation school-children understate the deaths to about 2 million (1). Understatement is a common linguistic device in a global war of rhetoric that would prefer to sweep many attempted genocides under the rug. King observes that North American history books understate the attempted cultural genocides of indigenous peoples, and instead turn to less controversial topics. We are asked to forget Wounded Knee, the murder of 300 Lakota women and children by the US 7th

Cavalry, The Trail of Tears, mercury poisoning at Grassy Narrows, residential schools, the slaughter of the buffalo, the 1969 White Paper, and Leonard Peltier, among other facts and events (160). Extending investigations by specialists on native culture such as Gerald Vizenor, King's research provides an invaluable and comprehensive account of past mis-deeds. For example, since annihilation and assimilation failed, King reveals the next goal as the elimination of "status Indians" (167). He reminds his reader of the 1991, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which made 440 recommendations, including the right to self-determination, as well as a unique form of dual citizenship, while recommending the abolition of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development to be replaced by the Department of Aboriginal Relations and the Department of Indian and Inuit Services. The document proposes that a meeting to determine adequate housing take place within 10 years, and that natives be included in any of the Canadian government's future plans regarding First Nations governance, health, housing, education, women's rights, Metis' rights, and economic development. In case you're still curious, King reminds his readers that the commission was ignored along with other commissions on the Status of Women, Bilingualism and Biculturalism, Capital Punishment, the Electoral System (171). While the Royal Commission recommended the equivalent of a "distinct social status" for natives, King reminds us how Elijah Harper stopped the Meech Lake Accord because it proposed to recognize Quebec as a "distinct society" while ignoring Aboriginal people. In his re-historicization of governmental policies in this chapter, King reveals their systemic and institutionalized racism.

Chapter 8 offers a trick title, "What Indians Want" but notes that what really matters is what non-natives want.

Here readers learn why native sovereignty was never allowed, why there exist arguments over legal definitions of "native," and what challenges face Indigenous people in establishing an economic base (204). For King the heart of the matter of all of these is the matter of land ownership. King observes that "North Americans, all along, believed the private ownership of land would turn Indians into Whites, while Native people have learned that the control of land can allow us to remain ourselves" (213). The land itself is fundamental to the spiritual values and ethos of native peoples. King reminds us that from a native perspective, land is part of their cultural heritage and it should be sustained, not exploited to the point where it becomes unusable.

Chapter 9, "As Long as the Grass is Green," notes that Indigenous people retain their identity and culture through land. Even amidst numerous broken treaties, King notes that the land contains the languages, stories, and histories of Indigenous people as well as providing water, air, shelter, and food. Land is included in ceremonies and songs, and land is home. King contrasts non-native attitudes toward the land through

the example of the Alberta Tar Sands. He observes that the production of each barrel of oil requires at least three barrels of fresh water, 90 percent of which never makes it back into the watershed. The waste water ends up in enormous tailing ponds covering over fifty square kilometres, and, so poisonous that they kill on contact. "It is only a matter of time before one or more of the earthen dams that hold these ponds in place collapse and the toxic sludge is dumped into the Athabasca River" which would lead to ecocide (219). King explains that eliminating potential ecocides is challenging because that from a Native perspective, Indian land is Indian land, but from a quasi-legal North American perspective, Native land belongs to the federal government and is on indefinite loan to a particular category of Native People. Recent sites of contestation over land reveal continued abuses, Ipperwash, Stoney Point, Kinzua Dam in the Alleghenies, Oka, the Treaty of Medicine Creek, the Puget Sound War, and the Shaughnessy Golf and Country Club debacle in Vancouver. Such contestations involved attempts at seizing indigenous land without regard to treaty rights.

Chapter 10, "Happy Ever After," examines two so-called indigenous land-claim "victories:" the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement. He contrasts the complex economic realities of "fee simple" and "trust land" with reference to Alaska and Nunavut (253). "Fee simple" involves ownership statutes where the owner holds title to and controls the property. In this case, the owner makes decisions about how the land is to be used without government oversight. However, "trust land" involves land owned by an individual indigenous person or a tribe but the title is held in trust by the federal government, which means that decisions about how the land might be used involves the direct oversight of the federal government. While land was issued to indigenous peoples through treaties, in many cases, the manner in which the land was to be used still remained in the hands of the Canadian or U.S. federal governments. King explains that under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANSCA), 44 million acres of land and \$963 million was assigned as "fee simple" land to the indigenous peoples (254). King observes that this land transfer arrangement seemed worthy at first. However, few people realized that under the ANSCA arrangement, tribal lands would be broken down into fee-simple pieces with the result that "Native people who had been part of a communal whole suddenly found themselves adrift as private landowners" (255). King reports that within one generation much of the land was lost and the people had scattered. There was no "happy ever after" in this case.

King's tour through the history of North American Indigenous peoples and their mistreatment is densely packed but eminently readable. Towards the end of the book, King recalls a 1987 Memorandum of Agreement establishing Gwaii Hanas National Park Reserve and the Haida Heritage Site as sacred land. This was a small but important victory asserting that native culture is dynamic and resilient, but also hard

pressed (251). Appropriately, this book is dedicated to grandchildren, and their children's children for generations yet to come, or what is called "the seventh fire." The notion of the "seventh fire" involves a way of life that plans seven generations ahead. Those who are curious, might consider this long, sad, history of the inconvenient Indian, and by learning from it awaken their senses to a more humble attitude of mutual respect, and egalitarianism. But such awakenings can only arrive for those who are curious and eager to know. Knowledge of the past can be troubling. This book "curiously" asks why nothing was done to stop centuries of oppression. The recent findings and recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission indicate a profound lack of awareness and accountability involving the suffering endured by indigenous peoples. In the spirit of reconciliation, and given its assembly of key historical facts, *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* should be compulsory reading for all high school and post-secondary school students across North America.

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Karl Jirgens has four books in print with Coach House, ECW and Mercury Presses, and over a hundred of scholarly and creative articles published globally. He recently served as a guest editor of the special Open Letter issue on collaborations, and he edited and wrote the introductory essay to *Children of the Outer Dark: The Poetry of Christopher Dewdney* (Wilfrid Laurier UP). He has edited the international literary journal, *Rampike*, since 1979. He is currently the Acting Head of the Department of English, at the University of Windsor.