

RLG 209HS

Introduction to Indigenous Traditions

Alderville First Nations: The Journey for Equality

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The road to recovery for Canada's Aboriginal community has been a long one, and in some ways, there are many more miles to go. For many decades white Europeans came to the land that would become Canada, taking land from the Aboriginal people, often by force or unequal treaty. Historically, Aboriginal Canadians have been treated as second class citizens, and have not been given the recognition they deserve. However, in the recent past Canada has tried to come to terms with the way it has treated its Indigenous citizens, striving to acknowledge its actions and apologize for them. Through ceremonies and celebrations, the history and contributions of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada is both celebrated and remembered. I attended the First Nations Remembrance Day ceremony in Alderville and what I learned there was an eye opening experience. This essay will argue that events like the Alderville First Nations Remembrance Day ceremony draw our attention to Aboriginal history and when examined, reveal the inequalities experienced by Indigenous people in Canada.

One of the goals of the Alderville ceremony was to educate non-Aboriginal society members about the inequalities Aboriginal soldiers experienced when they joined up to fight for Canada abroad in the World Wars. For example, many Indigenous men who were potential soldiers were initially turned away and even discouraged from enlisting in the First World War. “On the eve of the First World War, Canada had no official policy on the recruitment of Aboriginal people, as they were originally discouraged from enlisting” (Government of Canada). This quote highlights Canadian Government’s opinion of Aboriginals at that time, a second class of people, not fit to be soldiers. Perhaps too they feared that if Indigenous soldiers proved themselves capable warriors, by risking life and limb to defend Canada on the world’s stage, calls for better treatment of Indigenous peoples would increase. At this time World War One was grinding its way through thousands of soldiers daily and by 1916, the need for more men was so

dire that conscription in Canada was being considered. Despite all this, the Canadian army still refused to recruit First Nations peoples. As the deaths mounted and the troop shortage became more desperate, only then did the policy on Aboriginal soldiers change and they were let into the service. It is clear how Canada felt about its First Nations, they saw them as truly a second sub-class to their European counterparts. The First Nations Remembrance Day ceremony in Alderville that I attended shed light on inequities experienced by the Indigenous volunteers, explaining that Aboriginals were seen as the bottom of the social hierarchy, they were unwelcome unless no other options were available. I found this hard to fathom, especially since Canada at that time needed soldiers desperately. As I began to look around me, the expressions of pain and sorrow on the faces of many attendees confirmed for me the truth of those statements. It is an odd feeling to at once empathize with the sadness and experience my own righteous anger, as I compared the treatment of back then to the treatment of Aboriginals and non-white minorities in Canada today, which in some ways has not changed.

While it is true that Canada is now a diverse, tolerant and multicultural society, not all citizens embrace this vision of Canada. I myself have experienced discrimination, simply because I am an outsider to the Caucasian community. While I stood there in Alderville, hearing the stories of how poorly Aboriginal soldiers were treated, my heart felt heavy in my chest and my eyes welled with tears. It is true that I can never understand the experiences of Aboriginal people, but I can understand the inequalities and the discrimination. An Aboriginal soldier named Prince, spoke about the effects of discrimination, and the restrictions imposed on Aboriginal volunteers. In a powerful statement, he said “Aboriginal Veterans could be role models for younger people, but the restrictions and discrimination dealt to them by Veterans Affairs made this impossible” (Admin). Prince was alluding to the fact that there was continued

resistance after the wars by Canadian Government agencies to not celebrate Aboriginal contributions, suggesting that post-war the discriminatory stance against Indigenous peoples remained despite their many contributions. “Prince’s contributions to World War II, and later the Korean war were only recognized posthumously from his own countrymen” (Admin). The fact that Aboriginal soldiers were not being officially celebrated, speaks to the treatment of their war contributions as an afterthought, uncared for and forgotten. Not once in my high school history classes did we discuss the Aboriginal contribution to Canada’s wars. It is vital then that ceremonies such as the First Nations Remembrance Day in Alderville continue, as they serve to education Canadian citizens on a fuller picture of Aboriginal contributions to Canada, a history they may not otherwise be told.

Even once Aboriginal soldiers were allowed to join the war effort, they were still treated differently than their white counterparts. For instance, “some Aboriginal soldiers were discharged from the army for refusing to cut their hair” (Government of Canada). This is an act of discrimination against their culture and beliefs, it is indeed a willful blindness to the understanding of why an Aboriginal man would not want to cut his hair. Further, rather than make concessions based on cultural reasons to allow them to wear their hair long, they army decided to discharge them, a further act of disrespect and a show of white power over a marginalized people. Once in the army, “Aboriginal peoples’ military roles were influenced by the racial stereotypes held by recruiting officers and military officials” (Government of Canada) For instance, they were often made snipers because of their skills in tracking and patience, which meant they would be alone if they came under enemy attack. Upon returning from war, the unequal treatment continued, for example, “Some returned home to find the government had seized parts of their own reserve land to compensate non-Indigenous war veterans” (Todd).

Aborigines, who had sacrificed just as greatly as their Caucasian counterparts, were abused by the Canadian government who used their power to snatched away their land. Despite the fact that around a third of all Aborigines aged 18-45 enlisted in the army, only “50 were awarded medals for bravery and heroism” (Government of Canada). It makes one wonder whether these were given out as a way to buy their silence, to acknowledge that Aboriginal people did indeed serve and to keep them quiet regarding being mistreated by their white counterparts.

The Alderville Ceremony had a long segment of time where a few elders spoke about inequalities that they had experienced, and the differences between them and the ‘white’ man. As a coloured person myself, I can understand what it is like to feel like an outsider. For example, I immediately related to the feeling of a being an outsider when I encountered the story of a man’s grandfather, “He signed up in 1917 and in 1945 he was then issued with a black passport, which treated him as a complete outsider in his own country” (Haxton). I stood in silent reflection upon hearing about different kinds of inequalities these people faced, thinking back on my own life and realizing how similar my life is to theirs. I have never been treated fairly or equally, and my accent distinguishes me as a non-Canadian. Canada is my home, much like it is for the Aboriginal people, and yet both of us feel like outsiders within our own walls.

On top of the ostracization that First Nation soldiers experienced in the Canadian Army, those Indigenous soldiers who enlisted in the War effort had much more to lose than their white counterparts, including their Aboriginal status, which constitutes an assault on their sense of identity. During the Alderville Ceremony, I learned how soldiers would lose their Aboriginal status. Any Aboriginal soldier who enlisted in the War would be away from the reserve (their home/community) for over a period of four months, which meant that they would lose their standing (Alder). Being part of the army in an active combat zone, meant that First Nations

soldiers were not able to rotate back to Canada in order to keep up with the four-month requirement, thus breaking the law and losing official Aboriginal status. Not only did First Nations soldiers risk their lives but they were forced to give up their heritage, a steeper price than that paid by Caucasian soldiers who could return home after the war. Historically, Aboriginals have not been well treated in Canada, Rose states that “early Europeans didn’t ask the Aboriginals for permission to come onto their land, and they did not acknowledge their ownership of the country. They killed Aboriginal people and stole their land” (143). Yet even after generations of suffering under discriminatory Canadian governments, they stood up for Canada when the call came, an admirable move that deserves the greatest respect. The fact that I was not taught any of this in high school is disturbing. I feel as if I received my first real and honest history lesson while attending the Alderville ceremony. It leads me to question whether Canada is truly multicultural and accepting of diversity, as the poor treatment of Aboriginal peoples continues today. As I listened to speaker after speaker in Alderville I began to wonder, why did so many Aboriginals signed up for the army in the face of insurmountable discrimination and prejudice?

During the course of my research, I learned that motives behind why Aboriginal people enlisted in the War effort were varied, but mostly they joined because of “patriotic reasons or to honour the past relationship shared between Aboriginal peoples and the British Crown” (Government of Canada). First Nations peoples had a desire to fight alongside their Caucasian neighbors to show devotion and care for their country, to gain acceptance and understanding, and to be part of a victory. “Chief Joe Dreaver, of Mistawasis Cree Band in Saskatchewan, served in both World Wars. During the First World War, he was a sniper and earned the Military Medal, an award for bravery in the field” (Veterans Affairs Canada). Despite these sorts of celebratory

stories, there are many more that speak to the rampant discrimination Indigenous people faced throughout the different divisions of the army. First nations “were discriminated against in the Royal Canadian Navy, Canadian Army, and Royal Canadian Air Force because they were not of pure European descent and of the white race” (Emilaravn). The army was just as racist and prejudiced as the Canadian government. They were given the most hazardous roles, often in reconnaissance which had high casualty rates (Government of Canada). It is clear from the behaviour of the Canadian Army and by extension, the Canadian government, how they felt about Aboriginal people. They saw them as a second-class citizen, at first not even worthy of being in the army and once more soldiers were desperately needed, they were given the most dangerous roles on the battlefield. Based on this, it is my assertion that First Nation lives were not seen to be worth as much as a Caucasian soldier.

This is a clear case of discrimination, blatantly unjust treatment based solely on race. Acts of ostracization soon followed post-war. “When Caucasian veterans returned from the War, any Aboriginals whom had taken on jobs were forced out in order to make room for those returning” (Government of Canada). The country that called upon the First Nations in its time of need, was not grateful for the sacrifices made by Aboriginals. If they were, they would have started to treat Indigenous peoples with more respect, for example, by allowing them to keep their wartime jobs. One of the most damning acts of injustice occurred during the war, to increase wartime food production, the Canadian government stole land from Aboriginal Reserves. “The greater production effort involved the use of idle Indian land, fertile land reserves. The Indian Act was amended, eliminating the need to secure Indian consent to use such lands for farming” (Government of Canada). This constitutes an act of outright theft, regardless if the land was considered ‘idle’, it was not the Canadian governments to take. Nor is it

justifiable or fair to unilaterally change a treaty, especially without compensating the other party. The problem is, one does not hear about any of this in a traditional public school educational environment, most likely because the Canadian Government does not want the truth widely known. Our public education system is failing to inform us about Canada's full history, creating citizens who are unaware of the inequalities in the past and leaving them without proper context for the present. For example, when we had 'Remembrance Days' at my high school, we heard about the Caucasian veterans who gave up their lives. I never once heard of an Aboriginal veteran being part of the First War. I was shocked to hear the elders in Alderville speak of the treatment of Aboriginal soldiers during the wars. I was embarrassed at myself, for not knowing the true history behind the history I had learned in school.

The Ceremony at Alderville highlights the need to continue to bring Aboriginal histories to light, so that individuals understand the context behind the contemporary struggle for Indigenous rights and recognition. I feel as though my eyes were opened by attending the ceremony, I learned aspects of Aboriginal history that my high school education did not teach, which I believe is unacceptable and requires change. In high school we are taught, what can arguably be called, 'white history'. We are educated using Caucasian materials, white authors writing about other white men and their white society. Therefore, our textbooks are biased, only including one point of view, a 'white' perspective. The history of minorities in Canada, including Aboriginal peoples, goes grossly under-told and minorities continue to be unnoticed and unstudied. If we do not have events like the Alderville ceremony, where the minority perspective is given a voice, the roles that Aboriginals have played in Canadian history will become lost and forgotten. While Canada may pride itself on being a multicultural country today, historically it was not. The education materials used in public schools need to be updated to reflect the new

value system of a multicultural Canada, where being different is not only accepted but welcomed. The fact that I had to learn about the types of sacrifices made by Aboriginal people through an actual Aboriginal Remembrance Day, is unacceptable. If we do not have education that is inclusive, then we are not actually an inclusive nation. Perhaps subsequent Canadian governments were embarrassed to teach new generations about the tragic treatment of Aboriginals in the past. It is indeed true that “Canada’s 500 year-old relationship with Indigenous peoples; is a relationship mired in colonialism, conflict and denial” (CBC). The key term in this quote being ‘denial’, a refusal to fully own up to the wrongdoings of the past and have that behaviour on display for all citizens, young and old. Our nation cannot learn and grow from our mistakes without first learning what they are, and this begins with teaching Canadian children an unbiased and inclusive history of our country. The Alderville Ceremony has truly opened my eyes and given me a new perspective on how our official histories are leaving out some crucially important stories, particularly where Aboriginal histories are concerned.

As a society that strives to be equal and accepting, we must endeavour to right the wrongs of our past. The first step, is for all citizens to become aware of how Aboriginal people were treated in the past, so that we may assist them in regaining and preserving their culture. While Canadian governments today have made some efforts to acknowledge the actions of past, for instance, Justin Trudeau recently “apologized for abuse and cultural losses at residential schools in Newfoundland and Labrador” (The Canadian Press). Our efforts and the actions taken by the Canadian government on our behalf, must go well beyond mere apologies. As voting citizens in a democratic society, we bear responsibility for the way in which our government behaves, the actions taken and those that are not taken. If our government is unwilling to do so, then we have a responsibility to educate ourselves about Aboriginal history. Haig raises an

important point, “interacting with Aboriginal people [who hold] persisting deeply held beliefs and knowledge structures,[...] non- Aboriginal people may begin the process of learning what for them are secondary discourses[...]”(Haig 937). This was my experience at the Alderville ceremony, my eyes were opened to the truth of the Aboriginal struggle in Canada and the unfair treatment that caused so much suffering. It is in Alderville that I began to understand and empathize with the experience of being Aboriginal in Canada, I was learning their discourse, their story.

I believe other Aboriginal histories, would benefit from a ceremony like the Alderville First Nations Remembrance Day event. It would expose and educate Canadians about the injustice experienced by Indigenous peoples in this country and encourage them to support current efforts at recognizing and commemorating First Nations culture. Time and again, Aboriginal rights and land have been taken, their “Aboriginal languages and sub-cultures were transformed to the point of extinction” (Read et al. 76), through official government policies. This is something that all Canadians need to know, and I strongly feel that ceremonies like the one in Alderville are a great way to learn about Aboriginal culture and history. We have a duty to acknowledge all of our ancestors, including “all those first peoples who have shared this hunting, fishing, and agricultural land over the years” (Haig 926). I believe in a Canada that is one community, where we watch for each other, where we do not let one of our brothers or sisters slip through the cracks. We must endeavour to learn about Aboriginal history, so that we may better understand and position ourselves to assist our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, because for too long they have been downtrodden. We must do better and until then, perhaps we do not deserve to call ourselves true Canadians.

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