

Revolution and Residential Schools: Meeting on a Mennonite-Hän Frontier in Yukon

David Neufeld, *Parks Canada, Whitehorse, Yukon*

Introduction

In cross-cultural relationships each group brings its own traditions and understandings to the meeting place. Misunderstandings are natural in these circumstances. Each group arrives with its most precious possessions to share - among western Europeans this was generally their Christian faith. Certain in their knowledge of the validity of Christ's life and works, Europeans were often corrosive in their determination that their aboriginal hosts should accept this wonderful idea they had discovered. The inclusiveness of aboriginal cultures made them vulnerable to coercion of this kind and the newcomers often overlooked, and certainly rarely exercised, the reciprocal gift of acceptance of cultural variation. However an awareness of both one's own beliefs and agendas, and their genesis, and the scale of cultural divergence between the groups can help address these social shortfalls.¹

Mennonites have a deep and powerful sense of group identity. It has been created through a tradition built upon a common faith, a heritage based on the German language and culture and a shared history of involvement with the land through agriculture, close-knit extended family communities and suffering through periodic episodes of religious persecution. The Anabaptist belief in adult baptism, that is, the choice to join the community of faith, includes two elements central to Mennonite identity. First there is a reasoned and mature commitment

to a faith community. Perhaps less obvious, but just as important is the conscious acceptance of the mantle of Mennonite identity and a belief in both the importance and the validity of this heritage and its values. This moral certainty gives great strength but can also hamper the development of positive cross-cultural relationships between Mennonites and indigenous people.

In their search for freedom from religious persecution, Mennonites have migrated from their original homeland in the European low countries to eastern Prussia in the sixteenth century and further east to Imperial Russia in the late eighteenth century. The exclusive nature of the Mennonite farm settlements and their economic success through the next 120 years gradually earned them the enmity of their Russian and Ukrainian neighbours. During the migration to western Canada, in the period 1870s through late 1920s, a similar pattern emerged. In both cases the Mennonites immigrated at the invitation of the host governments and were able to negotiate extensive land grants and favourable tax and service agreements. These were advantages not extended to indigenous populations. The Mennonites arrived in both places with protected interests and an authority gained by national government sanctions.

Even with the best of hearts, the difference in power between groups can be extraordinarily difficult to overcome. The hegemonic role played by the citizens of, largely southern, Canada through national and regional governments, churches and other economic, social and political agencies has wrought massive changes amongst aboriginal Canadians. This element is the very crux of imperialism and only when power is recognized, surrendered or equally shared can real progress be made in developing sustainable cross-cultural relationships. This paper describes my personal journey of discovery as a Manitoba Mennonite working in such a cross-cultural environment with the Southern Tutchone and Hän people of the Yukon Territory.

In January, 1894, Bishop William Carpenter Bompas, the Anglican priest serving the Yukon interior for the Church Missionary Society, wrote to obtain the services of a school teacher for the local aboriginal children. In his letter he outlined the requirements for the position and described the challenging and isolated working environment. He noted the importance of having a person with considerable strength of faith and some maturity as the temptations in the region demanded a stable and secure individual. Bompas asked for a married man. The Yukon at that time was clearly, at least in Bompas's mind, not a place where a single school mistress could be left alone "and hardly an unmarried school master."²

Some ninety years later, I began working for Parks Canada as the Yukon and western Arctic Historian. My job as a Federal Government employee was to contribute to the grand project of incorporating the North into Canada, thus ensuring the people there the benefits of full citizenship and making the North a more useful part of our country. I was, in fact, the late twentieth century secular equivalent of the Christian missionaries. One of my first jobs in this project was to undertake historical research on the native perspective on the Klondike Gold Rush. As background, I made regular trips to the community of Carcross, Yukon, the head of the gold rush trail and the home of the Carcross-Tagish First Nation. There I spoke with the Chief and any other community members who would stop and listen to my ideas about their past.

After a few weeks I met the Band Manager who asked me into the office. Already discomfited by the community's apparent lack of interest in my project, I was nervous as he

followed me down the hall to his office. At the door of the modest office I froze, his chair was obviously the one behind the desk, but there were two chairs in front of the desk. I was so uncertain of protocols and so fearful of making a mistake I was sure that one was the wrong chair! Finally, I took a chance and sat down.

The Band Manager settled into his chair. For the next hour he provided me with a detailed history of the First Nation, the identity of the people and the various issues of heritage concern. I was perplexed as he dismissed the subject of my research with a derisive reference to a rowdy camping trip and focused on questions of identity and culture. It was only well into this discourse that I gradually figured out that the Band Manager was a Korean, born and raised in Hawaii and now living in the Yukon. Clearly the issues of identity I faced were no less perplexing than those Bompas was warning of. Despite being married with children, supposedly stable, I obviously needed to have a greater sense of certainty about who I was and what I was doing if there was to be any useful purpose in this work.

Meeting the Hän

About ten years ago, I began working with the Hän, the “People of the River.” Located in the Dawson region, the Hän people of the Tr’öndek Hwëch’in were the among the most negatively affected by the gold rush.³ The Yukon First Nation land claim process, just completed at that time, was largely a negotiation of a cultural accommodation with Canada. Parks Canada began work to “catch-up” with aboriginal commemorations. My assignment was to foster Yukon First Nations interest in the national historic site program in an attempt to broaden national commemoration beyond white history. And the Tr’öndek Hwëch’in work on language preservation and their battle to protect a traditional river fish camp indicated significant interest in their cultural heritage. My success, as measured in the identification of an aboriginal national historic site here, would make the Parks Canada system more inclusive and thus contribute to Canadians’ sense of their nation as a respectful multi-cultural society. Nevertheless over the course of the decade I learned that the relationship between cultures was not so simple. I also gained insights into the cultural and heritage similarities and differences between Mennonites and Tr’öndek Hwëch’in.

The October 2000 *History of Aboriginal-Mennonite Relations Symposium* in Winnipeg provided an opportunity to reflect on this comparison. The conference organizers suggested that the two people had commonalities “....their close ties to the land, their minority position, their emphasis on equality, their commitment to spiritual values [might] serve as a foundation for common understandings. Perhaps by examining these themes a stronger partnership between our two peoples can be forged.”⁴

The connection to land appears to be a natural point of conjunction between Mennonites and the Tr’öndek Hwëch’in. Both groups have a long standing tradition of working close to the land, although the Mennonites gain theirs through agriculture while the Tr’öndek Hwëch’in through hunting and gathering. Through the last century, however, the people of the Tr’öndek Hwëch’in have been dispossessed of their land. The masses of people coming into the region during the Klondike Gold Rush pushed the Tr’öndek Hwëch’in off their traditional lands and subsequent developments kept them off. Government regulations on land use were especially hard on their traditional life.

Percy Henry, a respected elder of the Tr'öndek Hwëch'in, describes the difficulties facing his people in pursuing a traditional life on the land and the consequences falling from this; "they've piled rules and regulations half way up to heaven," making it hard to get out on our land and make a living. "You see, the Indian people see, 1955 that's when handout start to come and before 1955 we were proud people. Because we do it ourself. We want to go trap, we go trap. We want to go hunt, we go hunt. There's nobody to tell us not to do or what to do. But after they, when they take our pride away, no, you got to have license, you got to have license, license, license, license. Pretty soon Indian quit. They don't bother cut wood, they don't bother trap, nothing to be proud now anyway."⁵⁵ The crucial element here is the separation of the Tr'öndek Hwëch'in from their homeland, that place Raven created for specifically for them. Without a vibrant connection to their land, the Tr'öndek Hwëch'in are dislocated from their spiritual roots and suffer.

Mennonites do not have such a homeland, I don't think we ever did. Our faith denies a secular connection to material things and thus also to place. In its place we have created an unfettered, and indestructible, connection to God. All land is a gift from God and we gain our sustenance from this gift where ever it is. Despite this philosophical separation from specific places as "ours" or as places of origin, Mennonite experiences of loss and emigration from homes have left scars on our soul.

In February, 1994, I travelled with several Ta'an Kwach'in Elders to Dawson. During the six hour trip we each told stories. In my turn I described my Mennonite background, the religious foundations of the faith, the various migrations to new lands in search of freedom for our faith and the trauma of the Russian Revolution. I spent some time describing the destruction of the Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia, noting especially the loss of the traditional extended-family *Strassendorf* (village) settlements, so rooted in place. In my youth in the 1950s, only the church remained as the centre of this dis-located rump community. I grew up with a strong sense of being amongst the shattered survivors, fleeing to other countries, trying to retain and rebuild some semblance of community in a new land. As I wrapped up my story one of the Elders turned in her seat and asked, "Mennonites? What First Nation is that?"

I clearly had a recognizable and distinct identity, one that I was conscious of. It was only through my work with the Tr'öndek Hwëch'in however, that I was becoming conscious of how it shaped my life. In spite of historical dislocations, several values of being Mennonite remained uncompromised. These included the knowledge of and support gained from the extended family and the cultural security provided by the German heritage as expressed in language, cuisine and music. These two values promoted in me a considerable pride in my family and cultural lineages. My slow growth in understanding what they meant, however, provided more lessons in cross-cultural relations.

After several years of work in Dawson the opportunity to mentor a young Tr'öndek Hwëch'in member came up. She was a recent university graduate, bright, articulate and energetic and keen to help the healing of her community through heritage education. She started by spending four months in my office, picking up administrative skills, acquiring some hopefully helpful contacts and developing a sense of the work that needed to be done in her community. In this time we engaged in a number of discussions on broader issues related to her new job. During one such discussion on heritage she became quiet, and as I continued my point, she broke down in tears. I was surprised and confused and left the room, both to

give her a moment and for myself to try and think what had just happened. It took me several months to figure out what had happened.

For nearly 150 years Yukon First Nations have been under siege. Even before they met Euro-americans, new diseases arrived and in several episodes in the late nineteenth century decimated Yukon aboriginal people. The epidemics were selective, it was the Elders, the carriers of tradition, and the children that suffered most. The links binding the past to the future were weakened. Christian missionaries entered the Tr'öndek Hwëch'in area in the 1880s, beginning an evangelizing and educational campaign that would eventually culminate in the removal of Hän children to distant residential schools operated by the churches and the government. Over time the resulting loss of language, the interruption of the teaching of traditional subsistence skills and the discounting of inherited cultural values separated generations and greatly stressed family linkages. From the base of power Canadian society has granted my European race, university education, gender and government position, my stories of Mennonite fortitude and continuity must have been indistinguishable to this young Hän woman from this previous experience of her people. I had imposed, in the best imperialist tradition, my foreign Mennonite heritage as the model, an ideal response to the challenges of change. Her culture's experience and background were discounted once again.

In the summer of 1995, my two children and I travelled down the Yukon River to witness the first trading trip by the coastal Tlingit to the Northern Tutchone at Fort Selkirk in over a century. The event included a traditional greeting with drums and songs as the boat pulled into the landing with an exchange of gifts between the two chiefs before the Tlingit stepped ashore. This was followed by a welcoming dance, a feast of country food and finally the trading. My son was able to trade his homemade dinosaur models for eulachon fish oil from the Pacific and even came away with a few dollars in his pocket. Later, on the trip home, I talked with my kids about how the grandparents and great-grandparents of the people we had met had come together at Fort Selkirk to trade. I described the constancy of their presence in the land and the symbolic importance of the weekend gathering for those people. My daughter remained unimpressed, "So what does that make us? Nothing?" It was a hard question.⁶

I grew up in Winnipeg, the eldest son in a German speaking urban household, attending a Mennonite church every Sunday. By the time my youngest brother was born, ten years later, the household language was English. I married a Scottish-born woman and my daughter now knows more Gaelic than German. We attend a United Church, the nearest Mennonite church is probably 500 kilometres away. I have surrendered my language and given up my church, both critical components of my identity, in exchange for an upper middle class position in contemporary Anglo-Canadian society. Can I even answer my daughter's question? Yes, I can. Although much of the fabric of my personal heritage has been re-woven to fit the place I now live, there are still tens of millions of German speaking people in the world. There is no threat to the German language and culture from which I draw my identity, it is vibrant. And the beliefs and institutions of the Mennonite Church expressed in church, service institutions, publications and on the web also remain a powerful force in my family's life. I do not think my children are lost.

Yet what is the parallel experience of aboriginal people in the Yukon? For a century the Christian churches actively proselytized amongst northern aboriginal people to convert them

to “the true faith.” And Canadian government policy, expressed through the Department of Indian Affairs, similarly sought to assimilate aboriginal people into the Anglo-Canadian mainstream. Both agencies sought to do this by stripping people of their past. Mary Jane Johnson, a Southern Tutchone woman from Burwash Landing, in southwest Yukon, told me about the experience of watching her past fade. She described the rich heritage of the region she grew up in, the many camps and trails resonant with myths and spiritual meaning and her language. But she also described how after the Alaska Highway was built and more white people moved into the Yukon, that their stories were not acknowledged, not respected, but instead, and here she held out her hand with fingers spread, palm up, “they were covered over” and she moved her other hand over the first showing only the roughened back of her hand.

In Dawson the case is even harsher. The excitement and tourist potential of the Klondike Gold Rush have done much the same thing. Aboriginal history has been overshadowed, especially since the early 1960s, by the extravagant promotion and recreation of the gold rush in the Yukon. The Tl’öndek Hwëch’in have similarly watched their history be covered over by a colourful caricature of the valiant pioneers who braved northern dangers to carve homes out of the wilderness. The number of Elders who can recall the ancient oral traditions of Yukon First Nations is small and the fully literate speakers of Hän can be numbered on the fingers of one hand. Language and heritage are vulnerable. There can be little comfort for First Nations, only an extraordinary measure of hard work.

Manitoba Mennonites and Yukon First Nations have vastly different experiences and carry their identity in different ways. In searching for common ground on which to base a relationship we need to be aware of what good relationships are made of. While shared interests and characteristics provide fertile ground for contact, a long term relationship depends upon an informed respect for the differences between them. Each party needs to understand what is being offered and be willing to accept differences as part of the relationship. This requires an equivalence in the power of each party and a deep understanding of what these differences are and what they mean.

Understanding the Treasures We Bring to Share

Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, two history professors in the United States, recently surveyed Americans on how they use and understand the past.⁷ They found that different cultural groups had constructed distinctive ways of interpreting the past to bring meaning to their lives and to link themselves together as a group. The past was an important element in cultural identity. However, even though all Americans nominally shared a common past, there were many different ways it was understood.

The Oglala Sioux of South Dakota who participated in the project emphasized the importance of the extended family as the source of personal identity and as the organizing framework for understanding the past. Lineages drawn to ancestors also were used to link individuals to events and places of cultural importance. This common ground re-inforced a deep sense of a communal history largely constructed from the oral testimony of elders. And the past from the elders was one of shared experiences on their traditional lands, of suffering at the hands of whites and finally, and most importantly, survival. Asked specifically what

was most important about his group's past, one Native American respondent summarized what many of the Oglala Sioux had said, "That we are still here."

The Tr'öndek Hwëch'in experience appears to have parallels with the Oglala Sioux. Their oral history tradition includes many stories of survival, usually old women abandoned by their group. These women use their well honed "bush skills" to not only survive, but to thrive, usually in the face of the group's starvation. Contemporary Elders in the Yukon also often speak of the necessity of the young learning bush skills, "Hard times are coming, got to be ready." Much of the energy of the First Nation leadership is also directed at gaining control of the regional environment and developing social, cultural and economic infrastructure to promote community self-reliance and independence. The land claim process in the Yukon from the First Nation perspective is not an economic settlement with Canada. Rather it is a negotiated cultural accommodation designed to gain recognition of their culture and to ensure equal representation on those issues that affect the future of the community as a distinct cultural entity. Survival is based upon identity and identity is founded in the relationship with the land, the land where creation took place, the land where the ancestors lived and the land that guarantees survival. Percy Henry remarks, "The land is our history book."

The Mennonite view of the past is not tied to the land in the same way. Arising from the edges of the Protestant Reformation, Mennonites denied the primacy of the material and earthly rulers. They were thus perpetual emigrants of conscience and sometimes refugees hounded from their homes by the state. Mennonites have given up their connections to specific places in exchange for a more direct and personal relationship with their God. The distinctive character of this approach to the past, the importance of the family and the reliance upon elders and ritual for its transmission, only became clear to me later in life as I began work with First Nations and learned of their ways of connecting to the past.

I can recall clearly three elements in my relationship with *Großma* (Grandmother). She regaled us with stories of the golden age of Mennonite life in the Russia of a century ago, remembered out loud the cruelties and horrors of the Revolution and disciplined us firmly, admonishing us that hard work, the railway section crew was regularly advised, would soon set us straight. It was only much later that I realized that these three elements were combined into a single vision of the Mennonite past based on the Bible.

As a boy I sat and listened to *Großma's* stories. Mixing elements of her youthful reminiscences with dreams of her approaching afterlife, I grew up with a colourful portrait of the edenic life in the Mennonite street villages of southern Russia. With the few rescued photo albums of her youth, she told, nay taught, me of the importance and value of close family relationships, the values inherent in our faith and strove to instill in me the lessons of the ten commandants. Interspersed with this idyllic vision of a world lost were her sharp and painful memories of its devastation - the onslaught of the Makhnovite anarchists in 1919 and 1920, the Mennonites who took up arms and the resulting destruction of the orderly villages, the murder of fathers, husbands and brothers, the raping of mothers, aunts and sisters, decapitation of children, and the ravages of disease.⁸ This was surely a fall from grace and an expulsion for the transgression of gaining too great a taste for earthly goods and for using warlike actions to defend these material gains.

Rarely spoken of, but well known to me were the difficulties and hardships of immigration and of resettlement in a new land. Hard work was necessary to gain even a foothold in

the Canadian prairies, this was done by the time I was born. *Großma* always reminded me of the hard labour made to provide the middle class life I grew up in, but focused her lessons on the importance of keeping faith with God. She, like the elders of the Tr'öndek Hwëch'in, did this teaching to make sure I would have the skills and knowledge necessary for survival, so that I could avoid disaster. But for me it was a deep knowledge of the Bible, a faith recorded on paper, and my ancestor's ordeals for their faith as told to me in stories, that were to be my guide to life. For the Tr'öndek Hwëch'in it is the ancestors' stories and their faith as written on their land, that guide their lives.

The way we interpret and use the past is a crucial key to who we are. Each group has places, things, memories and stories that we hold close to our heart. They have meaning for us in ways that go far beyond the pleasure they provide as we remember, visit or share them. Tr'öndek Hwëch'in Elder Percy Henry refers to these things as "our treasure box." Both the Mennonites and the Tr'öndek Hwëch'in carry treasure boxes. Each carries things that are entirely unique to that group but both use them in similar ways. The treasure boxes carry our heritage and our history, our understanding of who we are and how we connect with the larger world. And those treasure boxes gain value, and survive, only when we share the contents with our children and grandchildren and entrust them with their stewardship.

When we meet with another group and share our treasure box, it is important for us to recognize the jewels that the other group carries and cherishes. Relationships are built upon inclusion, understanding and respecting difference and celebrating the communication between us. Failure follows an attempt to force others to see and accept the beauty of only our treasures. If we are to have any success in reaching across the cultural divide that separates Mennonites from aboriginal people we must be very conscious of what our treasure box holds and who we are. With a clear sense of who we are, as opposed to what we believe, we can then learn about, and respect, the treasure box of aboriginal people. Only then can we begin to build the bridges between groups that will sustain the health and happiness of both peoples.

Notes

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1979) and Fritz Fischer, *Making Them Like Us - Peace Corps Volunteers in the 1960s* (Washington, 1998.)

² Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Records of the Church Missionary Society.

³ Heather Pringle, "Forgotten Claims" *Canadian Geographic*, Nov/Dec (1996), pp. 36-46.

⁴ Symposium Program.

⁵ Personal communication, 2000, and Percy Henry Interview by Bob Charlie, April 15, 1993, Tr'öndek Hwëch'in Oral History Collection.

⁶ David Neufeld, "A Trading Trip to Fort Selkirk - Looking for a Yukon Identity," *Great Northern Lost Moose Catalogue* (Whitehorse, 1997), pp. 8-9.

⁷ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 162-176.

⁸ For a published example of this material see my great uncle Dietrich Neufeld's *Ein Tagebuch aus dem Reiche des Totentanzes* (1921) and *Mennonitentum in der Ukraine: Schicksalsgeschichte Sagradowkas* (1933). An English translation, *A Russian Dance of Death: Revolution and Civil War in the Ukraine*, was prepared by Al Reimer and published in Winnipeg in 1977.