

THE STORY OF PETER PAN, OR MIDDLE GROUND LOST

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THE HISTORIAN RICHARD WHITE elaborated the concept of “middle ground,” the contested, transformative space between diverse peoples. He, and others, have pointed out that influence flows in more than one direction in the colonial landscape. Especially in the early days, settler societies were themselves created and changed by the encounter, even as they gradually pushed aside indigenous societies. To this I add that, for the dominant society, memory of these transformations is selective, sometimes strategically so. More is forgotten than remembered about how we got to the present.

In the frantic call to assimilate indigenes, contemporary mainstream discourse overlooks the middle ground and remains oblivious to the long prior history of efforts at assimilation, amalgamation, and even, occasionally, mutual aid. Another voice calls for the mainstream to embrace indigenous viewpoints and practices, also oblivious that this process has been under way long since. There are costs for these acts of forgetting. As Rebecca Bateman recently pointed out in the pages of *BC Studies*, the dominant society continuously recycles the same small set of administrative policies and practices, forgetting earlier failures. Legislators rotate in and out of office, leaving no collective memory of the longevity and nature of the relationship between colonizers and colonized. Public debate on indigenous issues



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is regularly born anew, always fixated on the exploits of first contact (wherein indigenes encounter sugar that looks like maggots and sailing ships that resemble migratory birds) and on the current moment. This is the Peter Pan Complex – dim, exotic memories of infancy and vivid impressions of the present, with nothing in between.

The version of the Peter Pan story I bring to your attention is not the one from Disney Studios but, rather, the darker book version. In it, Peter can't clearly recall his earlier relationship with Wendy (and her predecessors) or the little brothers, and he takes them on long dangerous flights where, it is intimated, if they fall asleep, they will crash unnoticed into the ocean and drown. He's not interested in Wendy when she grows up. Peter is ageless, yet is interested only in children – one could say, his “wards” – as long as they listen to him and do what he wants. He doesn't listen at all. “Girls talk too much,” he tells Wendy.

In my story, the Indians (the term of reference in Peter Pan and in the Indian Act) I consider are not the Blackfeet who help Peter attack pirates, but the ones who likely flew with Peter and whose whereabouts were previously unknown. They have now been located. In my telling, there is an adult. He is not Wendy's mother, father, or dog. I found him in the Upper Nicola band Office, near Merritt. He is Scotty Holmes, band land claims negotiator. His office is right in the middle ground Richard White talked about. The land claims building is a small former church, standing almost alone in open rangeland. A few other tribal buildings have been built nearby – a school and a tribal centre among them. The former church is now stripped of liturgical features except a clever, skinny closet where church vestments were once hung, now disguising itself with paint. It's empty and seems useless, but it knows that land claims may be concluded some day, and it can once again have something new to do. It's biding its time; like everything in the middle ground, you don't know where it's been unless you look closely. On the wall is a big, impressive hand-drawn map, framed for safekeeping. Everyone's eyes are drawn to the map. The map is signed by I.W. Powell, Okanagan Agency, and it depicts Indian reserves in the late nineteenth century. Indian superintendent Powell is not forgotten by the Upper Nicola band, nor are his words – especially not by Scotty Holmes. Powell was no Peter Pan, but, he, too claimed what he wanted, which was land.

Scotty Holmes has his own story to tell at the moment, and it's just a version of the Peter Pan story (but told from the Indian viewpoint) of promised trips to Neverland led by a boy who promises

to forget as quickly as possible in the interest of having fun his way. Peter, recall, pulls his knife on enemies. He's not too kind to the Lost Boys, either. We forgot this part of our own story. We always forget part of the story. In Scotty's story, the federal government negotiated with the Upper Nicola to hold some land on Douglas Lake in "commonage"; however, it quickly forgot about this arrangement and sold off the land to ranching interests when it turned out that ranching would be the best way to have a lot of fun. It was particularly fun for Peter O'Reilly, the Indian reserve commissioner who determined band land allocations, because he is said to have had a financial stake in ranching. The locals remember that part of the story. Scotty adds to it. Later, when the Upper Nicola people working in the former church pointed out that they wanted to have fun, too, the government officials remembered the arrangement but not well enough to know if the commonage was 18,000 or 33,000 acres. They think it's more likely 18,000. They will swap stories with the Upper Nicola band about this – but only "preliminary" stories, not final stories, even though they've had a very long time to prepare their version. The government is distracted by school teachers, buses, and nurses and likes to take its time in the hopes the Upper Nicola will forget or run out of the money needed to gather a crowd and tell the story at the courthouse. They won't, though.

Because Scotty Holmes is a storyteller, with a good story to tell, he can change tone quickly, light-hearted one moment and rather dark the next. It makes for excitement. He knows his audience keeps changing. He says he doesn't care who the BC government is, mentioning that "we'll simply have to educate another group." He knows the deep commitment of the government to forgetting and the reverence in which Peter Pan is held. He understands that the government is perplexed because lots of people and cows live in Neverland now. The city folk and the ranchers don't want to give back any land, don't want to turn Neverland back into the middle ground. They've installed electricity. Scotty probably knows that in the old days, when there was a middle ground, people could remember, right in the very church where he is telling his story, that the main character was Moses. Moses' story was about travelling through the desert and taking over land by conquest. The people in the Moses story were very good at remembering but the story is largely forgotten now. The story about forgetting is regarded as more suitable at present, although times change, and one can't always count on this. There is evidence that some courts insist on telling stories about remembering,

or at least partly remembering. One court said that the Indians could tell their own story as they remembered it. A new politician, in support of Peter Pan, doesn't like this at all and has promised to get everyone to sign a piece of paper that will ask them if they agree to forget. It will be called a referendum, if it's remembered. Other politicians are suggesting he forget about it.

Scotty Holmes's story is about the future as well as the past. He doesn't know all the details, but he knows the ending, which, oddly, is rather like the past when there was a middle ground. He says that his band will "get the ranch some day. We're working on compensation right now." He wants to keep the negotiations moderate, neighbourly, courteous, "our way." His story can get a bit pointed, though. "You only use your laws to suit your needs; that law doesn't apply when we need it. If you want one law for all, let us make the law! When we follow your law, and it doesn't suit you, you want to change it." He knows the new part of the story about the courts but doesn't choose to emphasize that at the moment. In his story, the Upper Nicola band has "lots of options. It's a new era." The story might not include a stopover at the courts, but, if it does, his relatives are getting prepared. They will know what to say. They've recorded lots and lots of stories, none about Peter Pan, but lots about Coyote and Raven. These are stories all about everywhere in Upper Nicola territory. In my story, these are called "place-names" and "charter myths." But these stories will be told Upper Nicola style. Scotty said: "When it gets back out, it's our world. Not from somebody else's perspective. We will take it from our principles, our beliefs." Both Scotty's and my stories are about middle ground, so these Upper Nicola stories are transformed onto GIS mappings as well as told at home.

I can imagine this telling at the courthouse; it will make a good story, so good I will give it now. The government will tell about Peter Pan, a complicated version in which Peter is a Grown-Up. Even though Peter sometimes fought the pirates, in this version, Peter, the pirates, and the government are friends, or at least allies. They might even be the same person. They all like to capture Indians and they all believe Neverland belonged to them once they showed up there. The Upper Nicola people will tell about 33,000 acres, what the land is called, and what they were doing there when I.W. Powell and Peter O'Reilly came around. All the lost Indians will be found now, and they will be seated in the court, listening and telling their story. The Upper Nicola will remember this story, too, and tell it in the future.