

Tourism in Saskatchewan

Margery Fee

Although I can't be completely sure, it was likely April 1978 that Michael Taft and I drove to Batoche in my trusty VW Rabbit. There was still snow on the ground, for sure. One vivid memory is of coming to an ice bridge across the South Saskatchewan River; pickup trucks were bombing across it in sprays of slush. Signs warned, "Use at your own risk." Michael wanted me to floor it across. I remember pointing out it was *my* car. I turned around and took another route with a *real* bridge. When we got to Batoche, there were no signs, only mailboxes along the road that bore the same names we saw in the graveyard. Six graves bearing the same Ukrainian last name were of children who had all died on the same day. The only other grave I remember was Gabriel Dumont's, on which rested a slightly open package of Drum pipe tobacco. We peered through the windows of the church where Louis Riel declared his second provisional government in 1885 and found the bullet holes in the priest's house. Then, after crunching around aimlessly in the snow for a while under a gray sky, we drove home.

While in Saskatoon for the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) conference in early June this year, I drove to Batoche again. Since 2000, the Batoche site has been run by a shared management board of six members, three appointed by the Minister of Canadian Heritage, and three by the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan (Parks Canada n. pag.). Recently, the main road was shifted in order to permit the building of an interpretive centre. The church is still consecrated, and mass is said at least once a year on July 19, during the "Back to Batoche" celebrations that

have been held for over forty years. The original silver bell of the church was taken to Ontario as plunder after the defeat of the Métis. This year, it will ring in the church for the first time since 1885.

At the conference, I purchased James Daschuk's new book, *Clearing the Prairies: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and Loss of Aboriginal Life*, which points out that although Canada ranked fourth on the 2007-2008 UN Human Development Index, its Aboriginal peoples, if considered a single nation, would rank sixty-third, "the equivalent of Panama, Malaysia, or Belarus" (ix). When the numbered treaties were signed, starvation after the near-extinction of the buffalo had weakened people already devastated by smallpox. Tuberculosis and other infectious diseases raged through residential schools and reserves. Indigenous people were argued to be susceptible to disease because of their racial inferiority (Daschuk xxii). A long-standing trust in capitalist development and white civilization has left a great deal to do to repair the human and ecological damage of colonization.

The interpretive centre at Batoche now reflects a clear picture of how successive Canadian governments put incoming settlers ahead of those who had lived in the region for generations or for millennia. In 1869, Canadian government surveyors arrived in the Red River before the land had been transferred from the Hudson's Bay Company. To protest the incursion, Riel set up his first provisional government. In the hiatus, it became the legitimate authority (Gwyn 111-12). Thus, John A. Macdonald's government negotiated with Riel's government on the provisions of the Manitoba Act of 1870, which brought the territory around Red River into Confederation. However, the provisional government's execution of Thomas Scott, a member of the Protestant Orange Order, was regarded as murder in Protestant Ontario. Since a legitimate government carried out the execution, Riel was ultimately granted an amnesty, but only in 1875. By this time, he had been elected to the House of Commons three times, but was unable to take his seat because of the furor. The amnesty required him to go into exile for five years and to forego any future political activity. This history explains how a man often regarded as Canada's most notorious rebel became a Father of Confederation.

While Riel was in exile, the Canadian government did not fulfill the conditions of the Manitoba Act that his government had negotiated, which included bilingual services and a land grant of 1.4 million acres to the Métis (Stanley n. pag.). Macdonald, justly nicknamed "Old Tomorrow," replied evasively to petitions from the residents of the region for assistance during a period of recession, drought, and famine. The Indian agents withheld provisions,

which rotted in the forts (Daschuk xxi). On his return in 1885 at the request of Gabriel Dumont, speaking for the Métis who had moved to Saskatchewan, Riel declared the government of Canada a “sham” government (535).

On another day trip before the conference, some friends and I drove to Wanuskewin, also a National Historic Site like Batoche. Archaeologists working there since the 1930s have unearthed evidence of human habitation dating back 6,000 years. The valley site, which offered shelter during the winter, contains the remains of a buffalo jump and a medicine wheel. We saw a muskrat in the river and encountered many hyperactive mosquitoes. One can imagine that in the spring, as the mosquitoes rose up to claim their prey, the people moved out of the valley onto the windier heights. We took refuge in the interpretive centre, where bison burgers are now on offer. Like Batoche, the site is co-managed, in this case by a board that includes members of local First Nations (“Corporate Information” n. pag.). When I lived in Saskatoon between 1977 and 1981, I had no idea Wanuskewin existed, even though it is only five kilometres from the city. Gradually, then, over the last few decades, these places have been moved into prominence in consultation with peoples who do not fit easily into Canada’s nationalist narrative.

After the conference, I toured the Saskatoon Western Development Museum. According to a local friend who accompanied me, Indigenous presence in this museum is recent. After all, Indigenous people have long been seen as obstacles to development. Moving them off the land to make it available for “productive” use by farmers was the main goal of the treaty makers. Now, new exhibits in the museum describe how anyone who wanted to leave the reserve required a permit, as did any kind of off-reserve economic activity: the permit to sell a cow cost more than the likely profit from the sale. One exhibit also spells out how Indigenous farmers were not permitted to buy mechanized farming equipment, as this would arouse resentment from other farmers at unfair competition from the supposedly cosseted First Nations people. That being said, most settlers struggled to survive on poor land in southern Saskatchewan, in what was called “Palliser’s Triangle.” Although John Palliser, who explored this area in 1857-1858, felt the region would be unsuitable for agriculture, later the Canadian government would encourage settlers to homestead there. They engaged in disastrous farming practices that left the soil exposed to erosion by rain and wind. During the drought of the 1930s, their crops failed and their houses filled with dust, to the point where they had to leave their plates upside down on the table until it was time to eat.

The dominant worldview sees nature as something to be developed by humans; the Indigenous world-view, summed up in the phrase “all my relations,” puts relationships first, including relationships to the environment. The near-catastrophic results of the settlement of the prairies are still obvious, but the Canadian government is now engaged in new and possibly even more disastrous development schemes. At the conference, the four women who started the Idle No More movement (Sheelah McLean, Nina Wilson, Sylvia McAdam, and Jessica Gordon) explained that as a result of recent bills passed in the House of Commons, including the infamous Omnibus Bill, the Saskatchewan River is now the largest unprotected river in the world. Environmental protection is being removed and Aboriginal rights ignored. However, they note that the potential harm of these bills is overshadowed by the Canada-China Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Act (FIPPA), Canada’s biggest foreign trade treaty since NAFTA. You might remember the Harpers meeting with the pandas instead of with the Indigenous youth who had walked 1,600 kilometres from northern Quebec to Ottawa in support of Idle No More.

The Act has been signed but not ratified because of protests that it hands over Canadian sovereignty to another nation. Although it was not debated in Parliament, “it would allow Chinese companies to sue Canadian governments—in front of a third-party arbitrator—if the government does anything that threatens the company’s profits” (Radia n. pag.). If it is ratified, it will bind both the federal and provincial governments of Canada to its clauses until 2043. Opposing it in court is the Hupacasath First Nation, supported by the Serpent River First Nation and the Tsawwassen First Nation, along with the Union of BC Indian Chiefs and the Chiefs of Ontario (“Hupacasath First Nation” n. pag.). As the Idle No More women pointed out, this agreement ignores not only Aboriginal rights to consultation on development that affects their territories, but also the entire country’s right to know what its elected government is doing. History seems to be repeating itself.

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