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Unkept promises and the great mother

For Indigenous peoples, Victoria Day inspires reflections on a respected monarch's treaties, their disappointments

GARY LAPLANTE
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

This year, Victoria Day falls on the actual anniversary of Queen Victoria's birthdate: May 24, 1819. It's a nice coincidence, but to whom does this day matter, 202 years later? Most Canadians probably don't think of the actual person the holiday commemorates.

You may be surprised to learn that Victoria Day matters to First Nations leaders in the Prairie provinces. When First Nations leaders, present and former chiefs, comment about Queen Victoria Day, she is still referred to as the "great mother" or "great White mother," *kihcokimaskwew* (Cree for great chief woman), with whom their ancestors made treaties.

The First Nations' understanding of these treaties, as passed down the generations by the oral tradition, is that when they were negotiated, they were guided by the ancestors and when concluded, were sanctified by the sacred pipe and ceremony. When asked, these same leaders do not see themselves as royal subjects of the monarchy but, rather, revere the monarchy for embodying the foundation upon which the nation-to-nation relationship of Canada and First Nations is built.

The Crown-Indigenous relationship is still held by First Nations leaders as significant, even sacred, and Queen Victoria was the original Crown with whom the western numbered treaty agreements were made.

This concept of the relationship with the Crown is commonly held among chiefs in the Prairies. Indeed, it might even be a prerequisite for election as a leader of First Nations in the prairie.

The Royal Family generally, though recently much in the news, is not a subject of interest for most First Nations people. The recent passing of Prince Philip received extensive coverage in the media and many people across Canada watched the funeral service as it happened, but First Nations people, in particular the elderly, met this news with ambivalence.

The reigning monarch, Queen Elizabeth, is well respected.

First Nations people in Saskatchewan remember that her first stop on a visit there and to Alberta in 2005, the centenary of these two provinces joining the Canadian Confederation, was at the First Nations University of Canada's Regina campus.

In her speech to an audience mainly composed of First Nations people and journalists, we were delighted to hear the Queen acknowledge the treaties between the First Nations peoples and the Crown. She further paid tribute to First Nations by presenting a stone tablet, taken from the grounds of Balmoral Castle, inscribed with her own and Queen Victoria's initials.

Not lost on the First Nations audience was that her acknowledgment of the treaties was made on Treaty Four territory. That treaty was signed on Sept. 15, 1874 — 31 years before Saskatchewan and Alberta became provinces.

Alphonse Bird, then chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian

Nations, recalls that he was looking for the first opportunity to tell the Queen that Canada had failed in many respects when it came to the fulfilment of the Crown's treaty obligations.

Although he did not and still does not see himself as a royal subject of the Queen, Bird clearly remembers his late father, Korean War veteran Allan Bird, saying that when he joined the army and served in the Korean War, "I fought for the Queen. I did not fight for Canada."

He was proud to have served in the Queen's army, as he saw it, with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. This relationship is symbolized when First Nations veterans proudly dance in carrying the Union Jack in our largest gatherings, the powwow grand entries.

Personally, I had the privilege of attending on two occasions in which the Queen was the honoured guest. The first occasion was June 29, 1997, when then-prime minister Jean Chrétien hosted her at the Royal York Hotel in Toronto. The second was that day at the First Nations University in 2005. Both times people clamoured to try to greet the Queen or take a photo in her proximity.

I found it all surreal and curious. I anticipated a sense of awe but it never happened. Instead, I felt a bit of sympathy for her; she seemed to be just going through the motions of what was expected of her. It was her job. In retrospect, I am greatly impressed by her long dedication to that job.

From Moosomin First Nation in Treaty 6 territory, Saskatchewan, Chief Bradley Swiftwolfe commented on Victoria Day that, "It's good they still have this holiday. It's good they don't erase this part of our shared history."

Queen Victoria is not only significant symbolically, but her place in history and her day for commemoration is a reminder for the government of Canada and non-Indigenous Canadians generally that the Treaties are living documents, pointing out that the sun is shining, grass is still growing, and the rivers still flow. The treaties, it was promised, would last as long as these continued.

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Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations Vice-Chief Heather Bear, who has chaired the FSIN Lands and Resources Commission for years, has extensive knowledge of treaties, land claims, and resource development within the traditional territories of First Nations in Saskatchewan.

She is also a mother who sees high rates of suicides, violence, addictions and incarcerations among our youth that most people attribute to the government's policy of forcing our previous generations into residential schools. Bear readily agrees, but adds that disposses-



sion and alienation of our people from the land since treaty signing is also to blame.

The government removed us and kept us off the land, instituting a pass system that prohibited First Nations people not only from making a living from the lands but also from maintaining our relationship with sacred sites, where the ancestors carried out ceremonies that were and are integral to our tribal identities.

A significant example is the forced separation of the Plains Cree, Blackfoot (Siksika), Nakota and the Saulteaux from the Cypress Hills. For these tribes, the Cypress Hills are spiritually significant — a place of prayer and worship; our church. That alienation devastated the foundation of who we are, the core of our identity. Queen Victoria's red children were suffering. Did she know this?

Bear is grateful for the recent efforts toward reconciliation, but emphasizes the imperative for Indigenous peoples to reconcile and reconnect with the land, the source of our identity.

Chief Sylvia Weenie, of Stoney Knoll First Nation in Saskatchewan, commented on the passing of Prince Philip, saying her heart went out to Queen Elizabeth on the loss of her lifelong partner in both private and public life — Weenie had

Queen Victoria, seen in an 1897 file photo, is a figure of respect in First Nations communities, writes Gary LaPlante; her descendants, not quite so much.

lost her husband, former chief Ben Weenie, a few years back. With genuine empathy for the current Queen, Chief Weenie nevertheless is disappointed in Queen Victoria, because she believes the monarchy had real influence on the Canadian Parliament and its prime ministers in Victoria's days when Stoney Knoll had reserve land methodically and illegally dispossessed from it by the government of Canada.

The Stoney Knoll descendants still hold dear the treaty they signed in 1876 at Fort Carlton with Queen Victoria, and the outstanding land claim will be settled, but Chief Weenie remembers the generations of suffering that the scattered, landless people underwent as a result.

If we take a holiday, perhaps watch some fireworks and enjoy a May long weekend, First Nations people in the Prairies will remember the *kihcokimaskwew*, Victoria, for the reasons stated here. We may be ambivalent toward the Crown, but ultimately, we hope Canadians will not forget the promises made in the presence of the sacred pipestem by Victoria's representatives, which were to last as long as this land shall last.

Gary LaPlante is a Plains Cree-Metis from Moosomin First Nation within Treaty Six Territory.

Virtual tours help one company reach an entirely

TOURISM from INI

inside and out, telling them stories, taking questions and conversing.

She says her clientele is a mixture of people who have already been to P.E.I. and some who dream of doing so. For those who have been, it's Masuda's intimate knowledge of the Green Gables world that brings them to her virtual tours.

"They'll say, 'Oh! I went there, but I didn't notice this part,' or 'The guide didn't explain that part.' And some people have never been here; their dream is to come here, but they can't. And those people, I guess we're feeding their interest to come

to P.E.I. in person, physically," Masuda says.

Kelly Doyle is the owner of PEI Select Tours. He began the company with Masuda 20 years ago and he's dedicated to serving the niche market of Japanese tourists. That means Japanese-speaking guides and Japanese-speaking interpreters, and it also means that, with his international clientele severely dented, it's much more difficult — nearly impossible — to pivot to a domestic clientele.

That being said, while the virtual tours seem to be garnering positive responses, he sees them mostly as a stopgap measure to maintain interest until the pandemic passes. When

that happens, they'll likely re-dedicate themselves fully to in-person tours.

"If everything was back to normal and there was no pandemic, this would be like replacing

Canada is estimated to have lost \$15.7 billion in international travel revenues due to the pandemic

my guides in the van with a tape, you know? It just wouldn't be the same thing," he says.

"As far as the wintertime, between November and May, we may continue doing them and certainly for events like Easter or Christmas, but I don't think

it'll become a major part of our business."

For other tourism operators across the country, those without such a niche market, different decisions on virtual tourism will be made. What's certain is that they're all in the same leaky boat and all trying to find ways to stay afloat until the pandemic passes.

"Tourism in Canada was first hit, hardest hit and will be the last to recover," reads Destination Canada's report on tourism in 2020. "The state of the visitor economy is more dire than the impacts following 9/11, the SARS outbreak and the 2008 economic crisis combined."

Post Sept. 11, the report says it took more than 10 years for the sector to return to normal.

More and more, tour operators are turning to virtual tourism to try to shorten that recovery time.

In Alberta, Banff & Lake Louise Tourism offers up webcam views of some of their most picturesque scenery and interactive 360-degree tours of canyons, trails and, of course Lake Louise, in ultra-rich 4K video.

In Niagara Falls, you can take a 360-degree video trip under the Falls, without getting a drop on you.

Bird Kingdom in Niagara Falls, for the most part, hosts class trips from Ontario schools