

The Future is Mi'kmaq: Exploring the Merits of Nation-Based Histories as the Future of Indigenous History in Canada

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The Future is Mi'kmaq: Exploring the Merits of Nation-Based Histories as the Future of Indigenous History in Canada

INDIGENOUS HISTORY IN CANADA, over the course of the last ten years, has taken an exciting turn, moving away from broad studies of Indigenous groups in general and their relationship to the Canadian settler state and towards place-based studies of individual nations, their territories, and their unique experiences with colonialism. This is a practice that decentres the colonial state and re-centres Indigenous nationhood and, as a result, this has had an impact on the way we understand the field itself. The term “Indigenous history,” and even the term “Indigenous people,” can be misleading because it denotes a homogeneity that does not reflect the reality of Indigenous pasts and presents. In the aftermath of the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s 94 Calls to Action, which in part called for educators to play a role in remedying past harms done to Indigenous people,¹ debates surrounding the responsibility of historians to contemporary Indigenous lives have led to new and important shifts in the field. And as historians have worked to make space for Indigenous voices, experiences, and even ways of doing history, the way we conceptualize research has changed. It is no longer always useful to see “Indigenous people” as a single group, in both our understandings of Indigenous people in scholarly work and in the way we implement reconciliation as a concept. There are many Indigenous nations in what is called Canada, and each nation has its own unique history as a result of colonization. Reconciliation does not work as a one-size-fits-all remedy for colonial trauma, nor can Indigenous history be treated as the study of a single, homogeneous group if it is to do the many unique nations it discusses justice. The push to study individual nations has produced brilliant scholarship on regional – though many Indigenous academics would call these national – scales, and

1 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Volume One: A Summary – Honouring the Truth, Reconciling the Future* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 2015).

may hold some answers to questions about how to “do” reconciliation in a more adequate way.²

My work as a Mi'kmaw historian – who happens to focus a great deal on the Mi'kmaw nation – has been shaped by distinctly Mi'kmaw factors; at the same time, I am influenced by methodologies championed by scholars of other nations, who have come to conclusions about how to decolonize their own work in ways that honour their own cultures. For example, Mohawk historian Susan Hill's *The Clay We Are Made Of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River* takes a distinctly Haudenosaunee approach to the history of the confederacy's territory, using Haudenosaunee laws, stories, and cultural practices to craft a narrative that could not be done by anyone outside of the nation.³ Similarly, Allan Downey, a Dakelh historian, uses Haudenosaunee stories and cultural connections – as well as those of his own nation and others – to the game of lacrosse to write a history of the sport as a form of colonial resistance and cultural resurgence in *The Creator's Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood*.⁴ There are aspects of these books that in many ways are inaccessible to non-Indigenous people, and even Indigenous people from other nations, but these inaccessible moments are crucial to the way we understand reconciliation and our very conceptions of what are Indigenous nations. In Mi'kma'ki, similar trends have occurred in historical scholarship; these trends are informed by specifically Mi'kmaw worldviews, and it is these trends that this essay will discuss. Historians of the Mi'kmaq, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, have begun shifting what it means to do Indigenous history by using the Mi'kmaw language and centering Mi'kmaw conceptions of space and time in their work. This serves to disrupt homogenous conceptions of Indigeneity, while at the same time asserting a kind of Mi'kmaw academic sovereignty that reflects the promising future of the field.

Place matters to Indigenous nations; for many Indigenous people, our sense of place is often deeply embedded in our languages and cultural practices and

2 Recent Indigenous critiques of reconciliation as a concept and in practice are also something to keep in mind when talking about “doing” reconciliation. See, for instance, Michelle Daigle, “The Spectacle of Reconciliation: On (the) Unsettling Responsibilities to Indigenous Peoples in the Academy,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37, no. 4 (August 2019): 1-19; Mercedes Peters, “History not Enough: A Look at the Climate of Reconciliation in Canada Today,” *Acadiensis* Blog, 23 January 2017, <https://acadiensis.wordpress.com/2017/01/23/history-not-enough-a-look-at-the-climate-of-reconciliation-in-canada-today/>.

3 Susan M. Hill, *The Clay We Are Made Of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017).

4 Allan Downey, *The Creator's Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2018).

shapes the way we view ourselves in relation to the wider world. The Mi'kmaq have a term to describe our unique relationship to our territory, which we call Mi'kma'ki. We refer to this connection as “*weji-sqalia'tiek*,” which Trudy Sable and Mi'kmaw linguist Bernie Francis eloquently described in *The Language of this Land, Mi'kma'ki* as meaning “We sprouted from [the land] much like a plant sprouts from the earth.”⁵ Sable and Francis argue that the “Mi'kmaq sprouted or emerged from this landscape and nowhere else; their cultural memory resides here.”⁶ Our relationship to our territory is central to our identity and has governed the relationships we form with others, both in the past and in the present. These descriptions of *weji-sqalia'tiek* form the basis for how historians should, and are beginning to, understand the Mi'kmaq: our linkage to territory is important, unique, and can be found and expressed using our language. Histories on the Mi'kmaq for a long time ignored our experience of place, and wrote about us as players forced into colonial conceptions of territory and time. As of late, however, historians have begun to structure narratives that acknowledge Mi'kmaw places, using Mi'kmaw names and understandings of territory. The gesture sounds frighteningly simple but, in many ways, the very act of incorporating Mi'kmaw terms into history drastically changes the stories historians are able to tell and, along with that, shifts our understanding of relationships between Mi'kmaq and colonial settlers.

The use of Mi'kmaw territory in the work of John Reid serves as a brilliant example of the shift to legitimizing Mi'kmaw experience in history. Reid focuses a great deal on Atlantic World history, and much of his work has involved exploring the early relationships between Indigenous nations in the Wabanaki Confederacy – including the Mi'kmaq – and incoming colonial powers.⁷ Importantly, though, Reid often defines the spatial boundaries of his projects in First Nations' terms; this simple act removes power from the colonial leadership in his narratives and reminds readers of the sovereignty of the Indigenous nations with whom the colonial officials were interacting.

5 Trudy Sable and Bernie Francis, *The Language of this Land, Mi'kma'ki* (Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press, 2012), 17.

6 Sable and Francis, *Language of this Land*, 17.

7 See Phillip Buckner and John G. Reid, *Revisiting 1759: The Conquest of Canada in Historical Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Reid, *The “Conquest” of Acadia, 1710: Imperial, Colonial, and Aboriginal Constructions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); and Reid, *Acadia, Maine and New Scotland: Marginal Colonies in the Seventeenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981). The Wabanaki Confederacy is an alliance of nations in northeastern North America consisting of the Mi'kmaq, the Wolastoqiyik, the Peskotomuhkati, the Abenaki, and the Penobscot.

For example, in his 2009 article “Empire, the Maritime Colonies, and the Supplanting of Mi’kma’ki/ Wulstukwik, 1780-1820,” Reid refers specifically to the territories of the Wolastoqiyik and the Mi’kmaq when describing the places that would later be known as the Maritime colonies. In particular, Reid’s establishment of the territory Great Britain, France, and the United States worked to settle as “Mi’kma’ki” asserts Mi’kmaw sovereignty during an era of “widespread dispossession” in the “long eighteenth century.” Reid argues that while the Maritime colonies established themselves in Mi’kmaw territory and co-opted unceded lands with relative success, “the Mi’kmaq [never experienced] military defeat or made a formal surrender of territory, [but instead] had extended experience of diplomatic relations with French and British imperial officials based on the principle of reciprocity.”⁸ Reid places considerable power in the hands of the Mi’kmaq and reminds readers that not only were colonies operating in distinctly Mi’kmaw spaces in the context of the 18th and early 19th centuries, but that, in many ways, because the Mi’kmaq did not ever relinquish their territory people are still operating in Mi’kmaw spaces today.

Reid demonstrates how a simple language shift can change understandings of given spaces, and demonstrates how historical – and in many ways, contemporary – conceptions of territory often govern the way we write history. Shifting the way we refer to that territory can make space for historical narratives that have been undervalued or ignored completely. The acknowledgement of the Maritime provinces⁹ as not only a predominantly but a continuously Mi’kmaw space in historical work has actually pushed more historians to research the Mi’kmaq in eras that previous generations of scholars have deemed unimportant. When studies of the historical relationship between Indigenous people and settlers is centered on the settler state itself, Indigenous nations become plot points that come and go depending on when they are required to move the narrative forward; the determinants of that narrative have often been the historical territorial interests of the settler state itself.

Up until recently, in the broader histories produced to demonstrate the relationship that the Canadian state has had with the Indigenous nations that fall within – and sometimes *underneath* – its imposed borders, the

8 John G. Reid, “Empire, the Maritime Colonies, and the Supplanting of Mi’kma’ki/ Wulstukwik, 1780-1820,” *Acadiensis* 38, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2009): 78-97, esp. 79, 87-8.

9 Most of the Maritime provinces fall in Mi’kmaw territory, but it is important to acknowledge Wolastoqiyik territory in what is known as New Brunswick along the St. John River, and Peskotomuhkati territory in western New Brunswick as well.

Mi'kmaq have a very early but minor role to play.¹⁰ One of the most influential comprehensive histories on Indigenous relations with the Canadian state, J.R. Miller's *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada*, provides the perfect example of this kind of narrative.¹¹ While the book itself has been influential to understanding generally the troubled relationship Canada has had with Indigenous nations, the nature of *Skyscrapers*, as a broad historical survey with an overarching narrative tethered to the Canadian state, neglects the experiences of the Mi'kmaq – among other nations – or rather, places them within a certain historical context that downplays their experiences – and even their existence – in post-Confederation Canada. The Mi'kmaq feature in *Skyscrapers*' earliest chapters on early treaty agreements between Indigenous nations and colonial powers. Miller explains the role the Mi'kmaq played as military allies of the French as they “struggled” to claim territory and economic partners in the fur trade. Mi'kmaq history is also used to describe the “[decline] in military importance” of Indigenous people in “eastern British North America.”¹² By the end of the book's first section on early Indigenous-European relations, just as they were no longer useful to British colonial authority, the Mi'kmaq also become irrelevant to the national narrative as Miller turns to focus on the interests of a state determined to expand west.

When the narrative moves away from the settler state and shifts to focus on Indigenous nations, however, there can be a continuity afforded the Mi'kmaq that has not previously been done. As John Reid has eloquently argued, “General narratives have their place but must ultimately be discussed according to the particularities of experience.”¹³ Recently, historian Martha Walls has challenged these general narratives in her own work on the Mi'kmaq. Walls has been openly critical of the lack of attention paid to the Mi'kmaq in the years following Confederation; after spending most of her career so far writing about the Mi'kmaq in the 20th century, she argued in 2017 that “the histories of Maritime First Nations in the years since Confederation have only just begun to catch up to what has tended to be a more robust scholarship pertaining to the pre-Confederation era.” Not only were Maritime historians playing catch

10 Mi'kmaq territory, for example, extends into the United States.

11 J.R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

12 Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens*, 67-8, 84.

13 Reid, “Empire, the Maritime Colonies, and the Supplanting of Mi'kma'ki/ Wulstukwik,” 82.

up, she explained, but the very set up of the historical archive in the area had deterred scholars from exploring these understudied areas:

The divide between pre- and post-Confederation Atlantic scholarship on First Nations has been reinforced by policy-centred approaches that have drawn researchers to separate colonial and post-Confederation archival collections. However, the lived experiences of First Nations people suggest that the dividing line between pre- and post-Confederation that has been sketched by scholars was largely irrelevant to their daily lives.¹⁴

While Walls is rightfully critical of colonial archival collections, she has masterfully utilized those very archives to fill gaps in historical work on the Mi'kmaq. With an understanding that, while some may view the Mi'kmaq as irrelevant after a given period, the Mi'kmaq experience, instead, traces a completely different path, Walls works with archival material and writes histories that demonstrate remarkable Mi'kmaq resiliency in the face of colonial oppression – in the process acknowledging a continuous assertion of Mi'kmaq sovereignty and agency.

For example, Walls argues in her 2010 book, *No Need of a Chief for this Band: The Maritime Mi'kmaq and Federal Electoral Legislation, 1899-1951*, that the Canadian government's attempt to impose control over Mi'kmaq life by introducing the triennial band election system to delegitimize the Mi'kmaq Grand Council in 1899 was an abysmal failure. While the Mi'kmaq did adopt certain aspects of the triennial system, where the Department of Indian Affairs oversaw elections where only adult, male band members could elect a chief every three years, they did it on their own terms:

When confronted with the threatened imposition of the triennial system, the Mi'kmaq did not react rigidly in either [a traditionalist or a progressive manner]. Rather, over time and space, Mi'kmaq communities fluctuated in their acceptance, accommodation, or rejection of Ottawa's plan according to their own assessments of their changing needs. What is more, these diverse responses did not paralyze Mi'kmaq political action. Instead, by variously embracing,

14 Martha Elizabeth Walls, "Confederation and Maritime First Nations," *Acadiensis* 46, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2017): 155-6.

rejecting, and/or remodelling political forms, the Mi'kmaq created a syncretic system that drew on new and old political ideas and practices.¹⁵

Walls's work emphasizes how the Mi'kmaq exercised remarkable power in the face of assimilation policies that threatened their cultural and political integrity, and while they certainly accepted parts of the triennial system they embedded their own cultural practices within that system to keep these practices alive. As Walls demonstrates, Mi'kmaw agency stems from continued embodiment of political and cultural practices and adapting these to reinforce their resiliency over time.

The Mi'kmaw worldview and our understanding of culture, of our relationship to the land, and of our treaty agreements is passed down and upheld through generational practice; this ensures our survival and continued existence on our land. Walls and Reid have alluded to this certainly in their acknowledgement of Mi'kmaw territory and agency over time but, perhaps most clearly, William Wicken's *The Colonization of Mi'kmaw Memory and History 1794-1928*¹⁶ describes this continuity and demonstrates how centering analysis not on Eurocentric ways of remembering – or doing history – but on Mi'kmaw ways of remembering and doing history can change the way we view the past and present. Wicken asserts that Mi'kmaw memory largely determines the way that Mi'kmaw people interact with settlers and how they assert their territorial rights by describing how Mi'kmaw culture and generational memory of treaties influence how the nation challenges colonial power. *Colonization of Mi'kmaw Memory and History* tells the story of “the prosecution of the Grand Chief of the Mi'kmaw people, Gabriel Sylliboy, who in 1927 was charged with trapping muskrats during closed season.” Sylliboy used his knowledge of the 1752 Peace and Friendship treaty signed with the British Crown to challenge the charge, appealing to multiple courts in Nova Scotia to acknowledge Mi'kmaw rights to hunt on their own territory. While Sylliboy and the five other men he testified with were ultimately unsuccessful, Wicken identifies *King v. Sylliboy* as a moment through which we can view Mi'kmaw memory and understanding of the treaty juxtaposed against a

15 Martha Walls, *No Need of a Chief for this Band: The Maritime Mi'kmaq and Federal Electoral Legislation, 1899-1951* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), esp. 1, 8.

16 William Wicken, *The Colonization of Mi'kmaw Memory and History, 1794-1928: The King v. Gabriel Sylliboy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

Euro-Canadian amnesia surrounding the nature of the treaties themselves. Conveniently, settler courts had forgotten that the treaties Britain had signed with the Mi'kmaq were not land cessation treaties at all but agreements of reciprocity and co-habitation.¹⁷

The book explores first the negotiations that went into determining the Peace and Friendship treaties, not only consulting the written treaty documents but acknowledging the discussions that surrounded the treaty-making process – something that the Mi'kmaq valued highly during the 18th century and continued to value for centuries in the face of intense colonial dispossession and assimilation. Wicken demonstrates that collective Mi'kmaq conceptions of these treaties changed depending on the context of the relationship between the Mi'kmaq and settler populations at any given time; regardless of the situation, however, the Mi'kmaq remained centered on reminding a Euro-Canadian population of the agreements that their habitation on Mi'kmaq land relied upon.¹⁸ Of course, because of a fundamental lack of understanding of Mi'kmaq worldview, these rights claims were often ignored. Wicken explains that the verdict acknowledging Mi'kmaq treaty rights in the 1999 *R. v. Marshall* case¹⁹ inspired him to begin to trace Mi'kmaq memory and assertion of treaty over time, leading up to the *Marshall* victory.²⁰ In an era where ignorance of Indigenous rights is increasingly difficult to uphold, there is now room for work like Wicken's – work that understands contemporary Indigenous rights movements as Indigenous assertions of pre-existing and generationally upheld and remembered rights to land – to shift not only the way we view Indigenous rights contemporarily, but how we prioritize Indigenous historical memory as well.

Walls, Reid, and Wicken all write histories that feature distinctly Mi'kmaq conceptions of place, culture, and history, and while their methodologies could be used in histories focused on other nations and territories there is something to be said for acknowledging the untranslatability of some of the aspects of Mi'kmaq pasts to conceptions of “Indigenous people” as a whole. For example, thanks to what Walls calls “the invisible years,” where the federal government focused “westward” and ignored eastern Indigenous nations, the Mi'kmaq experienced less committed federal attempts at rolling out assimilation policies

17 Wicken, *Colonization of Mi'kmaq Memory and History*, 4, 84.

18 Wicken, *Colonization of Mi'kmaq Memory and History*, 7-17.

19 *R. v. Marshall* [1999] 3 S.C.R. 456, <https://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/1739/index.do>.

20 Wicken, *Colonization of Mi'kmaq Memory and History*, 17.

– at least for the decades immediately following Confederation. “As Ottawa was focused on more pressing concerns in Western Canada,” Walls argues,

it left the administration of First Nations people in the Maritimes to part-time Indian agents whose commitment to department exigencies was relatively lax. These circumstances left First Nations largely to their own resources. The cause of hardship at times, this circumstance also gave to the Mi’kmaq and Wolastoqiyik a certain latitude to continue to live – and often struggle – according to their own practices and customs much as they had in the colonial era.²¹

While this certainly does not mean that the Mi’kmaq and other Atlantic nations did not experience colonial trauma during this period, the weaker attempts at cultural annihilation allowed us to continue to practice and adapt our traditions under circumstances vastly different from many other Indigenous nations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Historical understanding of Mi’kmaw difference is important, not just for an accurate reading of the past but also in terms of thinking about reconciliation and how we work with Indigenous nations to redress the specific historical harms they experienced.

We are certainly starting to see an acknowledgement of the ways in which the Mi’kmaq and other eastern Indigenous nations differ from the western Indigenous experiences in recent works; this subfield of Indigenous history has certainly developed in promising ways over the last ten years, thanks in large part to the efforts of historians dedicated to centering Mi’kmaw experience. However, there is still a long way to go in Mi’kmaw territory; compared to the increasing number of studies on other Indigenous nations, historical works centering on the Mi’kmaq continue to lack specifically Mi’kmaw perspectives and understanding of history. While historians writing on the Mi’kmaq are certainly influenced by the work of Mi’kmaw scholars in other fields, particularly those of anthropologist Sherry Pictou,²² decolonial education

21 Walls, “Confederation and Maritime First Nations,” 156–7, 176.

22 See Sherry M. Pictou, “Small ‘t’ Treaty Relationships Without Borders: Bear River First Nation, Clam Harvesters, the Bay of Fundy Marine Resource Centre and the World Forum of Fisher Peoples,” *Anthropologica* 57, no. 2 (2015): 457–67 and Sherry Mae Pictou, “Decolonizing Mi’kmaw Memory of Treaty: L’sitkuk’s Learning with Allies in Struggle for Food and Lifeways” (PhD diss., Dalhousie University, 2017).

scholar Marie Battiste,²³ and geographer Diana Lewis,²⁴ there remains a need for Mi'kmaw historians to begin telling Mi'kmaw stories the way Hill and Downey tell Haudenosaunee stories.

As a Mi'kmaw historian, and one of the few Mi'kmaw historians who write on the nation,²⁵ Indigenous scholars from other nations have been particularly inspiring to me, not because of the information that they provide about their own cultures and histories but because of how they lead with their Indigenous knowledge and push the boundaries of a colonial academy that I have often wrestled with in my own work.²⁶ There is an immense amount of potential for historians working with the Mi'kmaq nation to take the field in even more exciting directions, particularly as we see historians like Susan Hill using important Indigenous knowledge as theory, like the Haudenosaunee creation stories she used in here *The Clay We Are Made Of*. There is room for Mi'kmaq knowledge to transform the way we think about writing and conceptualizing historical concepts. In this regard we have places to look to for inspiration, both in the work of influential Indigenous scholars focusing on other nations and within the Mi'kmaw nation itself by working with and listening to Mi'kmaw people about their memories and culture in respectful ways.

In the age of reconciliation, a focus on Mi'kmaw power, resistance, and deeply rooted historical connection and right to territory is imperative. The failures to address the problems we face as Indigenous people in Canada today are in part rooted in homogenous conceptions of Indigeneity and a push by the powers-that-be to search for one-size-fits-all answers to a network of diverse issues rooted in place, culture, and unique experiences with colonialism. This is why the movement toward nation-based Indigenous histories is so

23 See Marie Battiste, *Visioning a Mi'kmaw Humanities: Indigenizing the Academy* (Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press, 2016); Battiste, *Living Treaties: Narrating Mi'kmaw Treaty Relations* (Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press, 2016); and Battiste, *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000).

24 See Diana Lewis, "Tlilnuo'ti'k-Weji-sqalia'timk: How We Will Be Mi'kmaq on Our Land (Working Together with Pictou Landing First Nation to Redefine a Healthy Community)" (PhD diss., Dalhousie University, 2018).

25 The work of Mi'kmaw historians Stephen Augustine, Daniel Paul, and Don Julian serve as important inspiration for a younger generation of Mi'kmaw historians, as do the stories of our elders that we grew up hearing and learning from. Until this point, however, it remains that a majority of historical work written on the Mi'kmaq comes from non-Indigenous scholars. This is not necessarily a bad thing – there have been brilliant works on Indigenous nations written by non-Indigenous scholars – but representation matters, and, as a Mi'kmaw historian early on in my career, seeing Indigenous historians writing and publishing helps me remember that there is a place for me in the academy.

26 Mercedes Peters, "We've Always Been Here: Tracing Shifts in the Portrayal of Status, Agency and Mi'kmaw Women's Activism in the Micmac News, 1971-1979" (MA thesis, Dalhousie University, 2018), vii-xxi.

important. Right now, the direction in which Indigenous history heads can and should continue to talk about relationships between nations – Indigenous *and* non-Indigenous – and there is certainly room for broad surveys about how Indigenous people in Canada as a whole worked with the Canadian state. But the importance of Indigenous scholars writing histories that are distinctly *theirs*, and non-Indigenous scholars honouring unique Indigenous worldviews and historical experiences and focusing on reinforcing the unique experiences of individual Indigenous nations, cannot be overstated. Maybe our answer to the question of how we decolonize, how we do reconciliation, and how we do Indigenous history is not found in making broad strokes or claims about reality. Maybe the answer exists in the individual nations themselves. The future of Indigenous history, then, of reconciliation, is Mi'kmaq. It is Wolastoqiyik. It is Peskotomuhkati. It lies not in seeing Indigenous as singular, but plural, and letting the changes in thinking that come with that dictate our actions and our work in the field.

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