

A Journey Printed on Parchment

The parchment copies of the numbered treaties were made to travel, but few of them reached their destinations. When the agreements were signed there was intent to deliver a copy to each signatory: each First Nations chief would receive a record of what had been promised. Parchments would be printed and sent within a year. But not all journeys we wish to take are begun, and even fewer end with us reaching the destinations we intended.

In 2016 I graduated with a Bachelor of Science and after some work as a zookeeper I wanted to return to the lab. I talked to my PI. Grad school was competitive, so I would have to work on my GPA and secure some funding. I had spent 2018 developing my skills as a poet and artist, so when the opportunity came up to take some courses in English and Creative Writing, I jumped on it. I could work on my GPA and my writing at the same time.

Winter 2019

ENGL 373 B1:

Canadian Literature & Culture: Canadian Literature and Colonization

On the first day we were cramped in a classroom in Tory. Our instructor, Dr. Kristine Smitka, introduced the course with a series of images. The first topic would be 'Open Space' and we were shown some CPR advertisements that offered Canada's beauty as both empty and inviting. During the course we would be thinking about how these images came about and how they were offered to a public desiring land to build a home: land that was free of the Indigenous peoples that had always lived here. We would discuss how art and literature played a role in the colonization of this place. To supplement these in class discussions, we

were invited to attend a workshop in Bruce Peel Special Collections on the Representation of Indigenous Peoples in Print. Spots were limited, so we were told to sign up quickly if we were interested. I didn't wait, I did that most unmannerly of things and pulled out my phone in class to sign up for the workshop on the spot.

The workshop was on February 13th, 2019, and the path that my journey would take would then be forever altered. Special collections is deep inside Rutherford Library. The space is carefully controlled for purposes of light, climate, and security. Bruce Peel holds texts as diverse as ancient clay tablets and contemporary artist's books. Some of the most valuable elements of the University's archival collection are kept there. For the workshop we were shown a table full of beautiful rare and old books, but I don't remember most of them. What I remember clearly is the University's copy of the Treaty No. 6 parchment.

It's big. It is thin and light, but clearly was durable to have made it here from the date of its printing. I asked when that was. Linda Quirk ran the workshop and answered my questions in a way that nurtured my evident curiosity: "we have no idea."

"So how many were printed? How rare is this? How did it get here?"

"We have no idea. Someone would have to look into it."

The workshop was about Indigenous representation in print, but I had so many questions about the treaty parchment. Linda told us a story:

Calvin Bruneau, chief of the Papaschase First Nation, heard about the treaty parchment. He heard that this was a printed copy that was supposed to be delivered to the signatories of Treaty No. 6. But he had never seen one, had never heard of anyone having seen one. So, the chief asked everyone at a meeting of the Treaty 6 chiefs, is there any knowledge of this? To a person they all said no. No one has heard of this being delivered.

It's big. How did it get here? Why did the University have a copy when whoever was supposed to have this, didn't? This parchment belongs to a nation, but in its journey from the printing press it failed to reach its destination. I had so many questions, and none of them seemed to have any answers. But I tacked this down to my natural curiosity as exacerbated by my training in science. There were so many things I was curious about, and this was just one new thing on the large pile of curiosities deep inside my brain. I would stay on my path, do the work, raise my GPA, get funding, go back to the lab.

Every morning I read the Nature Briefing, a daily newsletter of news of interest to scientists. The morning after the workshop was no different, I sat at my computer with a cup of coffee and read the stories in the briefing:

Thu, Feb 14, 2019:

Nature Briefing

What 50 PIs taught me about why I failed to land tenure

By Bela Z. Schmidt

Own your project: Another PI told me that the best researchers take ownership of their projects. Or, as he put it, the best researchers do not ask for permission to do something...

Trust your intuition: Most of the PIs I interviewed told me that they made quick decisions with their 'gut'...

View yourself in your desired role: When I asked another interviewee how long he had been a PI, he said, "I have always been a PI — in somebody else's lab."

While reading this advice the only thing I could think about was the parchment. Only eighteen hours had passed since I first saw the document, and

the journey I thought I was on was now something very different. I would trust my intuition, I would own my project, I would view myself in my desired role. But although my journey seemed different from what it had the morning before, it would become clear to me that this was a journey I had always been on.

Let me tell you a story:

My dad's driving and I'm listening to stories about grandpa. He's telling me about the time they were hunting, and grandpa shot a buffalo in the heart, but it wouldn't fall down. He's telling me about grandpa's canoe. But then he tells me: grandpa signed treaty. He tells me this in a voice filled with reverence, in a voice filled with respect. Of all the things that grandpa did, this was the most important, and it is important that I know this.

Another time, my dad's driving and I'm listening to stories about grandpa. This time he's telling me about the time they went to the hot springs and grandpa called all the elk to him. He's telling me about the time they went fishing and he had his fish stolen by an even bigger fish. He's telling me about grandpa's cabin. But then he tells me again: grandpa signed treaty. He tells me this again in that same voice. He's so proud. It is important that I know this.

A month passes and I've spent hours in online archives, digging through parliamentary session reports from the 1870s. I've looked at purchase orders, receipts, and inventories for any mention of parchments of the sort that the treaty would have been printed on. I've read treaty commissioner reports. I've looked at family trees. I found out exactly when and where my ancestor signed treaty, who he was and where he came from. I've learned more about myself and my heritage as a Dene and Métis person than I ever thought I would be able to learn. And all of it was brought into focus just by seeing the treaty parchment. I wonder, if I can learn all this about myself and this place, just by having access to the parchment,

what are all the people that were supposed to have this document being denied? How extensive are the consequences of the failure to deliver copies of the treaty as promised? What might be different if that journey had been completed?

That month passes and I have a meeting with Lewis Cardinal to talk about this work. He tells me a story:

The story for Treaty 8 is similar, but we know that those parchments were eventually delivered. It just took a while for them to get to us. The treaty was signed in 1899, but it was a good ten or twelve years before we got the copies we were supposed to get. So, there was a good ten or twelve years where First Nations and the Crown weren't on the same page, where we didn't realize that what had been agreed to was not what made it into the record.

The story of the failure to deliver the parchments is the story of suspense, the story of not knowing. If a decade could pass before the nations of Treaty 8 discovered that the Crown was not honouring its side of the agreement, how much damage was being done in Treaty 6? The first signings of Treaty 6 were in 1876, and that suspended state of unknowing did not just last ten or twelve years as they did with Treaty 8. If the Treaty 6 parchments were never delivered, then we were still to this day living in that suspenseful state. Again, I had cause to wonder about the consequences of the failure of the parchments to be delivered. The consequences of this uncompleted journey had been very personal to me. But I was certainly not alone. This work I had begun was so much bigger than me.

Two weeks later and I'm meeting with Janet Rogers to talk about this work. She asks me for my story:

I was born here. Here, on campus, and the hospital just down the road. I did my degree in science in biology, just over there. This is my home. My dad always told me about how grandpa signed treaty, but I didn't really understand what that meant.

She says, “excellent.” She grabs a pen and draws a circle on a piece of paper, shows it to me, points to the centre of it. “This is you, here at the University of Alberta. All this work you’re doing ties back to you here, you can build from that. It’s your home. Work outwards from there. This is your life’s work now, you know that right?”

It’s April 2019 and it’s time to do the final project for Kristine Smitka’s class. It has been less than two months since I have seen the treaty parchment. I’m possessed with the work; it has become the core of my art and poetry. Everything ties back to it. I’m still an undergraduate in the English department, but I’ve received so much support from everyone at all levels. I am no longer writing to boost my GPA to get back to the lab and do an M.Sc. in Biological Sciences. I’m now writing to tell the story of the journey of the treaty parchments. I’m now writing to tell my story, my family’s story, the story of this place. Kristine has suggested I use the opportunity of the final project to get a head start on those ideas that I’ll be working on further in graduate school, but in an M.A. in English.

I start with the concept of open space. I construct a work of visual poetry titled: *CPR Advertisements of a Populated Landscape*. It is in the shape of a quarter section of the sort that settlers building a new home in Canada would have called their own. It is just the words “open spaces” repeated over and over again, overlapping in densely packed lines that obliterate the white space of the page. You can stare into the text and see the contours of a landscape, see the promise of a new home in a land without its First Peoples. This poem opens a short chapbook

that I stitch carefully by hand. I produce several copies and give them away to those people that have helped me find sure footing on my first steps on this new journey of my life's work. I give a copy to Lewis and he tells me how proud he is that I am taking up this work. I give a copy to Janet and she tells me to keep focus and to tell my story, to remember how much treaty means and that treaty is forever: as long as the sun shines and the grass grows. I give a copy to Kristine and she tells me she feels that she's holding something that one day might be considered very rare and very valuable. I give a copy to Linda, and a few days later she tells me a curious thing by email:

I was very touched by the fact that you gave me a copy of your chapbook and I very much enjoyed reading it. Thank you very much. It will make a nice addition to Bruce Peel Special Collections...

I had to read the email a few times. My little chapbook would now be kept in the same facility at the University as the treaty parchment. I found it hard to believe that this journey of mine that seemed like it was only getting started, was getting such a momentous start.

I tell dad about this and he is very proud. He tells me:

Grandpa would be very proud. I wish he was still around so you could talk to him about this, he'd talk your ears off. I'm proud, and I know he'd be proud too. You're doing this work for our people, for the ancestors. And the ancestors always know. I'm proud of you my boy.

The journey is only getting started. It took me from the depths of Rutherford Library, into my family's past, and sure enough back again to a new home for my family's story in the same library. I've worked at tracking down

other parchment copies, and soon my journey will take me to Ottawa where I'll be seeing the original treaty manuscripts. Where I'll be seeing my ancestor's signature on the pages of Treaty No. 11. Perhaps most curiously I tracked down a copy of the Treaty No. 4 parchment to Trinity College Library Dublin. How did it get all the way to Ireland? We will likely never know, as the copy there was either stolen or lost, and has not been seen in quite some time. But for a time, it sat in a cardboard tube on top of a shelf, across an ocean from the place of its printing. Far, far away from its intended destination, a First Nation of Treaty 4 territory. There is a story there, one I'm curious to learn more about. I cannot share that story with you yet, but I can share this one:

In a library underground there is a parchment copy of an agreement made between nations. One nation promised to print copies of the agreement and deliver them to the others. That promise was never kept, and no one knew where the copies of that agreement ended up. One day, a young student saw the copy kept in that library and had many questions. So, they began a journey to answer them.

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