

# "LAY OF THE LAND" BY ARTHUR MANUEL

Arthur Manuel was from the Neskonlith community of the Secwepemc nation, located on the Interior Plateau of B.C.. He was part of an intergenerational legacy of struggle for the rights and dignity of Indigenous peoples whose lands were stolen from underneath them by Britain.

## Foundations of Land Theft

Europeans used a legal fiction known as the doctrine of discovery, an "international law that gave license to explorers to claim vacant land (*terra nullius*) in the name of their sovereign," (ictinc) to lay land claims over occupied Indigenous territories.

However, Europeans had encountered Indigenous peoples. To "get around this inconvenient fact" that the lands were in fact inhabited they declared Indigenous peoples "non-human." This practice of land theft was common throughout the Americas. All "that Europeans had to do to expropriate the lands in a region was to sail past a river mouth and make a claim to all of the lands in its watershed." This single act transformed the land into British "possession" without consent, knowledge, or any necessary dealings with Indigenous peoples living on the territory.

*"The doctrine of discovery...was a legal fig leaf they could use to cover naked thievery." - Manuel*

### Timeline: Usurpation of Secwepemc Land

#### 1778 British Land Claim

Captain James Cook, a British explorer, sails along the coast of British Columbia and lays claim at the mouth of Fraser River, claiming possession of the entire watershed for Britain. (see Figure 1)

#### Early 1800s European Traders

European traders like Simon Fraser begin arriving on Secwepemc territory and are treated as guests because "with us when a person enters our house he becomes our guest.... We traded with them, we shared food with them, and we often helped them on their journeys through our territory." For fifty years the parties trade together with "more or less friendly relations."

However, traders start to settle and their numbers increase, promises are broken and they start making demands, and "backing their demands with garrisoned outposts." This process continues to present day through the "ongoing effort to extinguish our title to the land through force or one-sided negotiations."

Figure 1: Map of the Fraser River watershed that flows through the Interior Plateau. Arthur Manuel's home community, Neskonlith, (marked red) is located near Chase



#### 1860s Gold Rush

Settlers begin permanently living in the territory and their numbers steadily increase. The discovery of the Cariboo gold fields creates a rush of prospectors who pass through Secwepemc territory and tensions rise. This unrest places "this new mining wealth at risk" for the growing colony on the B.C. coast which was governed by James Douglas. During this time the Secwepemc peoples are "under great stress because European diseases were sweeping through [their] country."

#### Neskonlith Douglas Reserve 1862

A meeting takes place between a colonial emissary and Chief Neskonlith, "a tough and uncompromising leader...[who was] chosen to speak for the four bands around the Shuswap lakes". Together they mark out on a map almost 1 million acres and agreed "the territory [was] for exclusive Secwepemc use." The agreement is subsequently broken and no restraints are put on settlement; whittling down Secwepemc territory to barely 7000 acres. The "colonial powers began to give away 160 acres of our land, free of charge, to each settler who applied...[while] in an astounding act of racism, the authorities allocated only 20 acres for [Indigenous] families." This is all done "without consent or even notification". (cont'd on reverse)

## 1910 Laurier Memorial

A declaration is presented by the B.C. Interior chiefs to Prime Minister Laurier in 1910 in Kamloops. They outline the injustices inflicted on their peoples and land: "they treat us as subjects without any agreement to that effect.... They set aside many small reservations for us.... This was their proposal not ours, and we never accepted these.... We never have been satisfied and never will until we get our rights ... settlers not only invaded our territory, but also began to treat us as trespassers ... from the lands that had been ours since time immemorial."

## 1927 Indian Act Amendments

Indigenous WWI veterans, like William Pierrish, return home "with new determination to hold the government to account for its broken promises to our people." Pierrish and two other B.C. chiefs travel to London, England in 1926 with a petition to the Privy Council but are turned back to address the Dominion government in Ottawa. The government responds "to the threat posed by this new [Indigenous] activism" by making draconian amendments to the Indian Act in 1927 that place new controls on Indigenous life. The changes make organizing illegal, forbid Indigenous peoples to leave reserves without permission from an Indian agent, and remove the possibility of making claims against the government through courts. However, "this repression did not extinguish resistance. It merely drove it underground." These new restrictions last until 1951.

## 1950s National Organization

Indigenous peoples begin to build national organizing capacity to "take their fight to Ottawa and to Canadians" by creating the National Indian Brotherhood, "the forerunner for the Assembly of First Nations."

## 2007 UNDRIP

UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples passes "by a vote of 144 to 4, with Canada leading the charge of the rights deniers."

## Loss of Land is Impoverishment

This pattern of usurpation has been a common experience for Indigenous peoples around the world. In B.C. it has led to Indigenous lands accounting for only 0.36% of the land mass and the settler share being 99.64%. This has led to crushing poverty and horrifying statistics when compared to non-Indigenous Canadians.



## Legacy of Struggle

Indigenous struggles for sovereignty began soon after settlers began arriving in large numbers and they continue to this day. Manuel shares that, "as my father, Grand Chief George Manuel, often pointed out, the most important gift we have received from our parents, grandparents, and great grandparents is the legacy of struggle." Indigenous peoples continue to assert their rights and fight against the racism that they face. These struggles are fought by men and women who struggle "for our rights in the national and provincial capitals, in the courts, and when necessary by demonstrating in the streets...[and] we honour them." Manuel continued this struggle as co-chair to the Global Indigenous Peoples Caucus at the United Nations' Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII). This is a global fight with "more than 350 million Indigenous peoples from around the world working together to regain our land and dignity."

## A Path Forward: Rebuilding

Manuel outlined the following points for what rebuilding Indigenous societies and communities could look like:

- "We are not seeking to join the multinationals on Wall Street...but to win back the tools to build our own societies that are consistent with our culture and values...**taking care of Mother Earth** is the most important contribution we can make." As more non-Indigenous peoples understand the need to care for Mother Earth, "we can be an **important ally** of those growing forces."
- By "reclaiming a measure of control over our lands, **we obviously do not mean throwing Canadians off it**...All Canadians have acquired a basic human right to be here" over the centuries.
- "We are certainly **asking for compensation** for the illegal seizures, but those amounts we can discuss." And, "we are asking for the right to **protect our Aboriginal title land**, to **have a say** on any development on our lands, and **be compensated** for the wealth it generates."

*"There is room on this land for all of us and there must also be, after centuries of struggle room for justice for Indigenous peoples. That is all that we ask. And we will settle for nothing less." - Manuel*