

## The Bookery

King, T. (2012). *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada.

A review by Adrienne Munro

Thomas King is a giant on the Canadian literary scene, and not just in stature (a reported 6'6"). Although born in California, King—whose ancestry is Greek, Swiss-German, and Cherokee—has made his home in Canada for more than three decades. His presence here has certainly not gone unnoticed. King wrote and performed in the celebrated "Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour" (1997-2000) on CBC Radio. Also, his short stories, novels, and children's books have netted him widespread acclaim, including two Governor General's Literary Award nominations, a Western Literature Association Distinguished Achievement Award, and the 2006 McNally Robinson Aboriginal Book of the Year Award. King delivered the CBC Massey Lectures in 2003 and received a National Aboriginal Achievement Award the same year, the Order of Canada in 2004, and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012. Book-length studies of his work published in 2003 and 2012—the latter featuring 23 contributors—further attest to his cultural salience. After retiring from the University of Guelph, King was named professor emeritus of English at that institution in 2013.

*The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* was met with a further shower of honours: finalist for both the 2013 Trillium Book Award and the 2013 Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize for Non-Fiction; winner of the 2013 Canadian Booksellers Association Libris Award for Non-Fiction; and nominee for the 2014 RBC Taylor Prize. While King clearly has the intellectual and academic savvy to have made this a lofty historical treatise, he chose instead to adopt a more accessible, readable style. The lack of footnoting should raise no alarm, however; King spent six years researching the book, and it shows. What makes his account so "curious," perhaps, is that he writes in his own voice, includes plenty of personal anecdotes, and presents it with humour and pathos rather than mere objectivity. He explains that, "although *The Inconvenient Indian* is fraught with history, the underlying narrative is a series of conversations and arguments that I've been having with myself and others for most of my adult life."

At its core, *The Inconvenient Indian* is a blistering indictment of centuries of cruelty, injustice, and indignity perpetrated by the forces of colonization against the Indigenous inhabitants of the lands now known as Canada and the United States. Such a premise could be expected to scare off a fair number of readers, but King isn't out to alienate anyone. He may be angry (and not without cause), but he's also charming, clever, and very, very entertaining. There's a reason King's literary efforts are lauded far and wide: he's a brilliant writer, an engaging storyteller, and a master of irony. In response to the notion that Aboriginal organizations should "have more faith in the laws of the land and the judicial system" rather than resorting to what some people perceive as radical tactics, King has this to say:

...It's a great theory. Simple and elegant. I can see the attraction. It's the kind of theory that someone unfamiliar with Native history and the integrity of the justice system might consider proposing.

The idea that justice is blind and that everyone is equal before the law reminds me of a traditional story that I've heard over the years, in which Coyote tries to convince a band of ducks that he has their best interests at heart. Even if you don't know the story, the premise alone should make you chuckle.

Numerous examples illustrate King's point. His account of the 1990 "Oka Crisis"—a clash pitting

defenders of a threatened Mohawk cemetery against police and military forces—explores the historical theft of Mohawk land and the ensuing centuries of “European arrogance and indifference” that precipitated the event. Indeed, King concludes that land is, and always has been, the critical divisive issue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in North America. King also discusses the brutality of government-sanctioned residential schools like the notorious Carlisle School in Pennsylvania: “Had I gone to that institution with Ernest White Thunder, Fanny Charging Shield, Susia Nach Kea, Nannie Little Robe, or Albert Henderson, I would have been buried with them in the school graveyard.”

Despite documenting such painful realities, the book is heartening at times. King makes the point that not all Indigenous individuals and Nations in North America are in crisis: in fact, some are doing quite well. There are Nations with robust economies; strong and successful Aboriginal social, political, and cultural organizations; and Indigenous people living interesting and fulfilling lives. As he says, “We’re cops, teachers, judges, writers ...We’re doctors, lawyers, and Indian chiefs. We’re everywhere. Absolutely everywhere. Just a reminder of our cultural persistence and adaptation.” On a personal level, King’s own good fortune is apparent from his periodic invocations of his partner Helen, a colleague, trusted advisor, and “treasure,” without whom he insists this book would not have been written.

Ultimately, *The Inconvenient Indian* is a hopeful book. King is looking to the future, calling for change, believing in the power of human decency. And when someone of King’s gravitas speaks out on such a vitally important topic, we would all do well to listen. To paraphrase the conclusion to King’s Massey Lectures, “Don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard these stories. You’ve heard them now.”

(Since this book review was submitted to JIS, Thomas King has won both the \$25,000 RBC Taylor Prize and the \$40,000 BC National Award for Canadian Non-Fiction for “*The Inconvenient Indian*.” - Ed)

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Rice, B. (2013). *The Rotinoshonni: A Traditional Iroquoian History through the Eyes of Teharonhia:wako and Sawiskera*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

A review by Debby Ritsco

Brian Rice (Natoway) is an associate professor at the University of Winnipeg in the Department of Education and adjunct professor in the Arthur V. Mauro Center for Peace and Justice at the University of Manitoba. A Mohawk scholar, Rice graduated with a Diploma in Aboriginal Education from McGill University, Bachelor and Master’s degrees in Religious Studies from Concordia University, and a Doctorate in Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge from the California Institute of Integral Studies. He has taught in the Departments of Native Studies at the University of Sudbury, International Development Studies at Menno Simmons College, and Continuing Education at the University of Manitoba. His published works include books *The Rotinoshonni: A*

*Traditional Iroquoian History through the Eyes of Teharonhia:wako and Sawiskera* (2013); *Encounters between Newcomers and Aboriginal Peoples in the East* (2006); and *Seeing the World with Aboriginal Eyes* (2005); as well as a journal article, "The Whitewashing of Native Studies Programs and Programming in Academic Institutions" (2003), in *The American Indian Quarterly*.

Although *The Rotinonshonni: A Traditional Iroquoian History Through the Eyes of Teharonhia:wako and Sawiskera* is an academic text, its comprehensibility and straightforward style of expression makes it accessible to laypeople. On days (and nights) when temperatures dip from -45°C to -50°C, this masterpiece is ideal for warming the heart and soul as Rice takes the reader on a journey into the history of his *Rotinonshonni* Longhouse People.

Written in narrative form from an Iroquoian perspective, Rice's historic account has an aura of mystique, as he physically traces Peacemaker's footsteps and reflects upon firsthand experiences related to traditional knowledge transmitted from Elders Cayuga Kaokwa:haka, royaner peace chief Jacob Thomas *Hadajigerentah* and his wife Yvonne *Kanhotonkwaw*. Using cinematic imagery, Rice brings his written work to life while maintaining the authenticity of traditional oral storytelling. Thus, Rice emulates a traditional *Rotinonshonni* Elder, maintaining traditional values of cultural survival for future *Rotinonshonni* generations. The *Kayeneren:kowa*, Great Way of Peace covenant in its purest form, has been passed between the *Rotinonshonni* people and Rice, as inspired by the Creator, *Teharonhia:wako*, for the benefit of kinsmen on Turtle Island and subsequent generations, so that they can move forward proactively and flourish as equals.

Before accepting this divine assignment, Rice had to pass a test of incredible endurance "in a personal month-long journey through *Rotinonshonni* territory, following the path of the Peacemaker" in Six Nations Territory (p. 3). Rice's journey began from the Mohawk community of Tyendingagato in Quinté, Ontario, as he walked to the birthplace of the Peacemaker at Eagle Hill, stopping at each historical site along the way until he reached "Oriskany [where] *Kenienké:haka* (Mohawk) and Sonontowa:haka (Seneca) fought against Oneota:haka (Oneida) during the American Revolutionary War...the place where the covenant that bound all *onkwe:honwe*, real people, to the Great Law of Peace was broken" (p. 4). This site is historically important but is also where Rice promised to "return someday with other *onkwe:honwe* to help heal the wounds that were rooted in the land" (p. 4).

During his journey, Rice began each day like his ancestors: with prayer and the burning of Sacred Tobacco. He repeated this ritual again at Little Falls, the site of his ancestral Mohawk burial mounds, which gave him the fortitude to journey on to Cohoes Falls where Peacemaker, Ayenwatha/ Hiawatha, and Tsakonsasé codified "the *Kayeneren:kowa*, Great Law of Peace", then Kahnawaké (home of his Mohawk father), and finally *Oneota:haka* or Oneida, New York. "I placed my tobacco down and was immediately refreshed by the thunder spirits' cool rains," he writes, suggesting the sacredness associated with Onontaka. It is "the place of the central fire of the confederacy where the Great Tree of Peace was planted" and where "the great war chief and shaman", Atotarhoh, awaited the arrival of the message of peace (p. 7). Tully Lake shore was where wampum shells as covenant were found. Cayuga country and the Sonontowa:haka site, Ganondagan, signified the traditional longhouse built in memory of Tsakonsasé's mother, Clan mother of peace, who led the Tuscorora (the sixth nation) to accept the *Kayeneren:kowa*, Great Law (1722), near Niagara Falls, at Lewiston, New York.

Through continuous participation in *Royaner* Jacob Thomas's and *Kenienké* Elder Jacob Swamp Tekaronieneken's recitals of the *Kayeneren:kowa*, Rice became their beloved disciple to carry Peacemaker's message on behalf of "the *onkwe:honwe*, real human beings, of the *Rotinonshonni* People of the Longhouse" to Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people; to scholars and lay people; to adults and children, as a blueprint for living a righteous and flourishing life. The loss of Elders due to colonization made it necessary for translating oral tradition into the English written language.

Rice's book becomes an exercise of redemption and reclamation of traditional knowledge—proof

that the distortions, misinterpretations, misrepresentations, and omissions in Canadian history and educational curricula by the Canadian federal government and the Christian churches have failed to destroy *Rotinonshonni* spirituality, identity, and ways of knowing. It offers credible corrections of slanderous stereotypes that have evolved in mainstream society as a result of government-induced Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on an innocent race of people. It provides insight into the struggle between Iroquoian perspective and pervasive Christian brutality. It gives all of us the opportunity to understand *Rotinonshonni* spirituality, culture and history and to appreciate the depths of traditions that are not our own. Rice asks a pertinent ethical question: "Who owns the rights to the stories that the writer has put down?" (p. 17). In light of the misuse of sacred medicine plants, dream catchers, and wampum for monetary profit and sacrilegious fads, without authorization and without adherence to proper ceremonial protocol, this becomes an important consideration. In contemporary society, for what is culturally much lesser offences than the misuse of sacred objects and sacred stories, Indigenous people are incarcerated in prisons. Hence, the intellectual rights of this Mohawk writer and the *Rotinonshonni* society from which his traditional knowledge derives should have the exclusive rights to receive protection of copyrights, to receive acknowledgement deserved, to grant authorization to be used, and to benefit from associated gratuities.

The main point of Rice's work is to acknowledge "a covenant occurred between the Creator and the *onkwe: honwe* and, if the *onkwe: honwe* are to survive as *Rotinonshonni*, they must keep their part of the covenant" (p. 19). He recommends assisting "in the recovery of knowledge for the *Rotinonshonni* youth" and continuing similar journeys with Elders in order to establish a solid footing for walking in both worlds with confidence (p. 21). Furthermore, he encourages other *onkwe: honwe* in all four corners of the Earth "to keep up the covenant that they have been given by the Creator" (p. 20). Rice makes it clear: we all have choices.

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## References

Rice, B. (2013). *The Rotinonshonni: A Traditional Iroquoian History through the Eyes of Teharonhia:wako and Sawiskera*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

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