

“THE JUDGE HOWLED LIKE AN ALGONQUIN INDIAN”: HISTORICAL WRONGS AND RECONCILIATION

When Europeans arrived in North America, they largely considered Indigenous peoples to be “savages” and inferior civilisations. To Europeans, the land they arrived on was virtually empty or “terra nullius,” an idea used in international law to justify the takeover of land. The racist view of a few “savages” scattered about an “empty land” was the basis of the European approach to Indigenous peoples for hundreds of years: it was the accepted view in respectable intellectual circles, it was upheld in court cases, and it was assumed to be the truth by the vast majority of Europeans.

Like far too many Canadians of the past, Stephen Leacock held many of these views. *Sunshine Sketches* makes this evident in the passage “You get that impression simply because the judge howled like an Algonquin Indian when he saw the sprinkler running on the lawn” (113). As well, Leacock’s 1914 book *The Dawn of Canadian History* refers to Indigenous people as “savages,” claiming that there were only 20,000 Indigenous people across all of Canada at the time of contact. With the big picture, Leacock was wrong. Conversely though, it is noted in Allan Anderson’s *Remembering Leacock* that in person Leacock was exceptionally kind to Indigenous people and people of colour. Also, Ralph Curry’s biography of Stephen Leacock notes that Leacock’s mother Agnes—a guiding force in Leacock’s life—was highly regarded by the people of the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation. And one of Leacock’s friends until his passing was Jake Gaudaur of the Métis Nation of Ontario, who he lionised in his essay “Bass Fishing on Lake Simcoe.”

Nevertheless, Leacock’s kindness in person does not negate his problematic academic views. These writings expose someone who was certainly a “man of his time” when it came to race and Indigenous people. As historian Margaret MacMillan said on CBC Radio One’s *Ideas*, “history reminds us that deeply held beliefs can often be deeply wrong, and they often can be held by very clever, very powerful people who have sources of all sorts of information and they still get it wrong”¹⁴. For MacMillan, this reality can help give us all a sense of humility as we look to the past, the present, and the future.

One way our society has been looking to the past, present, and future is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As the Truth and Reconciliation commission says:

reconciliation is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. In order for that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour.¹⁵

14 “Rear View Mirror: Has the future ever looked like the past?” *Ideas*. CBC Radio One. www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/rear-view-mirror-has-the-future-ever-looked-like-the-past-1.3878278, 28:10.

15 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*. 2015. www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Honouring_the_Truth_Reconciling_for_the_Future_July_23_2015.pdf, pp. 7-8.

Passages such as the one in *Sunshine Sketches* about Judge Pepperleigh's temperament—possibly referring to a war cry given that the Algonquins were embroiled in many famous wars with the Iroquois to the south—perpetuated a false view of Indigenous people in general and Algonquin people in particular.

Algonquin is an umbrella term for a cultural and linguistic group of Indigenous peoples that include the Mississauga, Ojibwe, Cree, Abenaki, Micmac, Malecite, Montagnais, and Blackfoot, who have lived for at least 8,500 years in the land now known as southern Quebec and eastern Ontario. The Algonquin language was considered a root language for many other Indigenous languages, so learning it became key knowledge for early fur traders who were pressing deeper into North America. Far from being a cry of anger, Algonquin language was important for building relationships between Europeans and Indigenous people. Unfortunately, despite the deep history and cultural importance of the Algonquin and other Indigenous languages, at least ten Indigenous languages have gone extinct in the past century. Of the 90 or so that remain today, almost all of them are endangered.

1. What kind of harm could passages like the one in *Sunshine Sketches* cause?
2. How can we atone for past wrongs such as this?
3. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has recommended funding be put in place to preserve and teach Indigenous languages.
 - a) How does language instruction help build a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country?
 - b) How can we change our actions in the future to ensure we are more respectful of Indigenous languages?