

**FIREWATER**



# **FIREWATER**

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**HOW ALCOHOL  
IS KILLING  
MY PEOPLE  
(AND YOURS)**

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**HAROLD R. JOHNSON**



**University of Regina Press**

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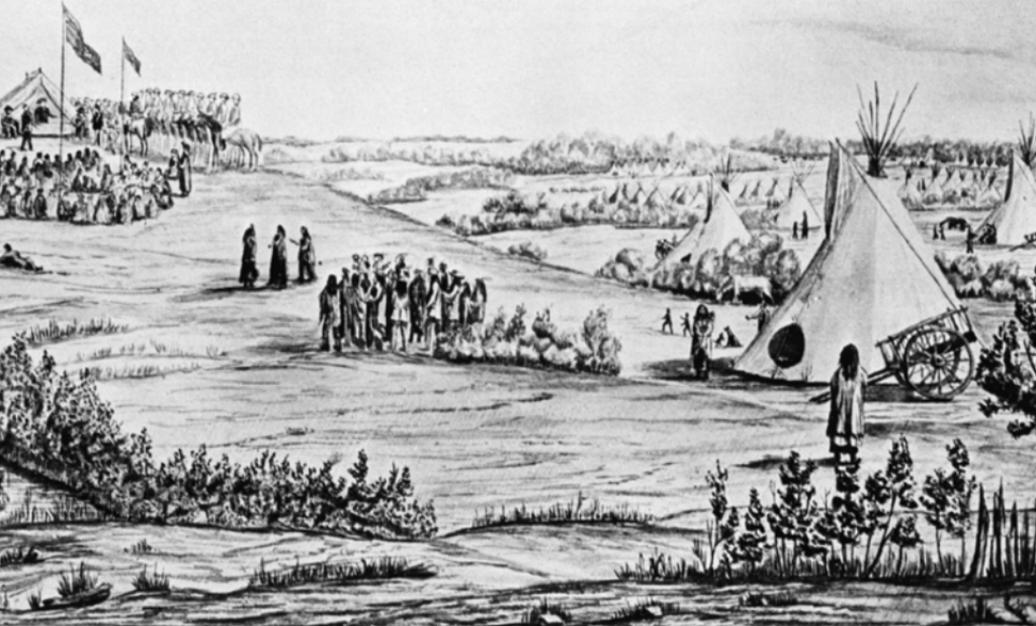


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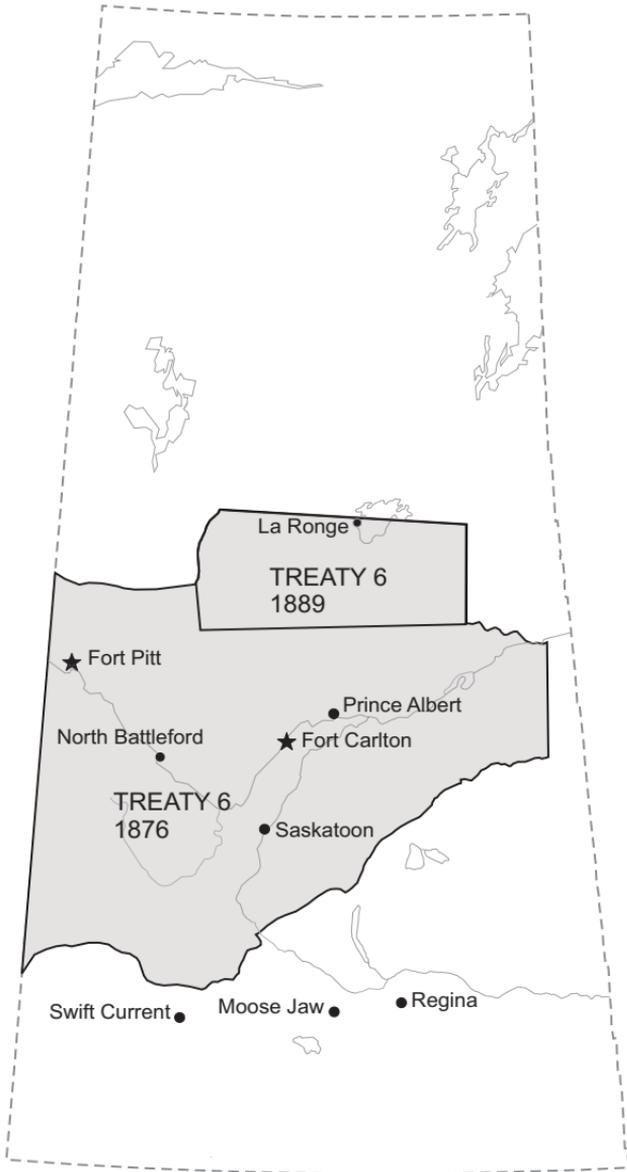
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Treaty 6 territory in Saskatchewan.

# PREFACE: THE AUTHOR'S FIRST WORDS TO HIS READERS

**T**his small book is a conversation between myself and my relatives, the Woodland Cree. Its purpose is to begin a discussion about the harmful impacts of alcohol consumption and to address the extreme death rate directly connected to the use of alcohol in our northern Saskatchewan communities.

Some of what I am about to say may sound harsh when the discussion turns to the things that are being said about us. You may not want to hear those phrases repeated. I include them because the discussion I hope to begin with you will be tough. We have to discuss trauma and alcohol and death. We have to talk about where we are, how we arrived here, and where we hope to go without making excuses and calling ourselves victims. I propose that the only way forward is to take full responsibility for ourselves and our present position and begin to tell a new story about ourselves. There is no easy or soft way of doing that.

## PREFACE

You may also wonder, who am I to speak of such things. Let me tell you this about myself and then you can go on to read more, but here and now, let me say this: When I was eight years old, my father died of heart disease. It shattered my little world. Shortly afterwards a tyrannical teacher decided to discipline me. He had me stay after class. He then took me to the bottom of the stairs, took down my pants, and strapped my naked buttocks with a piece of heavy belting. That beating I probably could have lived with, as severe as it was. But he went further. He ran his hand over my buttocks, he said to see if they were warm enough after the whipping. It was that bit of humiliation that set the disciplining apart, that made it something *more*, more horrible, more demeaning.

Outside, standing alone in the schoolyard, crying and humiliated, I talked to the only person I could talk to: I talked to myself. I told myself that the only reason he was able to do that to me was because my father was dead. If I had had a father, someone to look out for me, he would never have dared to do what he had done.

A few months later I was sexually assaulted by a boy six or seven years older than I. Again, unable to talk to anyone because of the humiliation, I told myself that he would never have been able to do that to me if I had had a father.

Angry, unable to tell anyone, I took it out on everyone around me. Mostly boys, but girls too—I beat up people for no other reason than that they had a father. I did it because that was the story I was telling myself. I've told myself many stories over the years—that I was deprived because of poverty, that alcohol had ruined my child-

## PREFACE

hood—and I acted out based upon the stories I was telling myself.

But here's the thing: I turned myself around. I was lucky. The horrible events I experienced when I was eight years old occurred before there were fancy theories floating around everywhere about trauma and victims. The problem with this latest story invented about us by *kiciwamanawak*—that we are a product of historical trauma—isn't just that it again makes us lesser people, people with a disorder. The problem is that it takes away our ability to do anything about it for ourselves. We can't fix colonization, we can't fix residential schools, we can't change *kiciwamanawak* opinions of us. If we are a product of historical trauma and so we're then victims, we are stuck in that story with no way of telling our way out of it.

And so, yes, I was lucky, because I never was diagnosed as or labelled a victim. When I was mature enough to realize that those events had caused some of my behaviours, I quit telling myself the story that the only reason things were not the way I wanted them to be was because my father had died. I forgave him for dying and went out and found new and better stories about who I was.

I changed the story about who I was and am.

And, speaking of history and story and defining who we are, throughout the text I have used the word *Indian*. Some people might have a problem with the word and find it offensive. We have all heard the story that Columbus was lost and thought he landed in India and mistook us for Indians. I prefer the explanation offered by Russell Means and the American Indian Movement (AIM):

## PREFACE

Columbus was not lost, he knew where he was, and he called us *In Dios*, meaning “with God.” The word is not as important as the story we tell about it. *Indian* is also a precise legal term found in our Treaties and the Canadian constitution.

The word *firewater* is a direct translation of the *nihithaw* (Cree) word *iskotîwapoy*, the word we use for “alcohol”—*iskotîw* means “fire” and the suffix *apoy* means “liquid.” The story I heard about how alcohol received its name tells of a time when the fur traders bartered with alcohol and were notorious for watering it down. To make sure that we were not being cheated, we would take a mouthful of the whiskey, then spit it in a fire. If the fire flared up, the whiskey was pure. If the fire went out, we knew we were being ripped off. We are still being sold firewater and we are still being ripped off, only today it’s not for animal pelts—we pay for it with our lives and our health and our children’s lives and futures.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea for this work began with an email from my son, Ray Johnson, containing an article about alcohol and anarchy. The authors of the article lamented that they could not organize as a group because alcohol kept getting in the way. The idea that alcohol was the reason why people did not overthrow their oppressors nagged at me, and I began to think about it and our situation as colonized peoples. Is alcohol the reason we do not push harder for self-government? It was an idea that would not go away. As a Crown prosecutor, I noted that the vast majority of people charged with offences were intoxicated at the time they committed the offence. When I started looking at alcohol in this larger context and realized it touched everything about us, I began to have discussions with my wife, Joan Johnson. Through many conversations with her and sharing information, the concept for this work began to grow. First, I wrote an article for *Justice as Healing* (University of Saskatchewan Native Law Centre) that I called “When He’s Sober, He’s a Good Guy.”

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

That didn't satisfy me, and I kept thinking about our people and alcohol. I came across the work of Dr. James Irvine and was surprised to discover that the leading cause of death in this territory was injury. Knowing that alcohol was behind most injuries, I began to wonder, what was the death rate from alcohol. Dr. Irvine has become a friend and has assisted tremendously in pointing me to the available literature. The more I researched, the more frustrated I became. There are no direct statistics for alcohol and its damaging effects in our territory. At this point I wanted numbers to back up the arguments I was beginning to make in court that the justice system had a role to play in looking more closely at alcohol.

The work that became this book was influenced not only by discussions with my son and my wife, but also with my daughters Memegwans (Sarah) Johnson-Owl and her sister Anangons (Alita) Johnson-Owl. Provincial court judges Sid Robinson, Gerald Morin, Bob Lane, and Don Bird were also part of the discussion and each contributed in their own way. Russ Mirasty, Alan Adam, Noland Henderson, Alan (Spud) Morin, Tom Charles, Donald Caisse, Ray (Turk) Desjarlais, Myles Charles, Richard Thatcher, Peter Butt, and Duane Hunt all added their voices and their ideas. Neal McLeod, Solomon Ratt, and Simon Bird helped with getting the Cree words correctly spelled and used in the right context. A special thank you to Tracey Lindberg and Richard Van Camp for their contributions. Karen Clark contributed much to the formation and construction of the manuscript. While I thank everyone who contributed, I, of course, take full responsibility for all omissions and errors.



# PART 1

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**KAYÂS: A LONG TIME AGO**

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# WĪSAHKICÂHK'S LOST STORIES

**K**ayâs, one day WĪsahkicâhk was watching television, and he saw an Indian story on there. But the story didn't seem right. It was all mixed up.

*He went to check the original.*

*He had it somewhere.*

*The Creator gave WĪsahkicâhk a whole bag of stories back at the beginning of time and he told WĪsahkicâhk, "Here, look after these, the people are going to need them to know how to live a good life, and they are going to need them when things get difficult."*

*But WĪsahkicâhk couldn't find them.*

*Man, he was in trouble now.*

*He lost the stories the Creator gave him.*

*So he went looking for them, and he saw Buffalo, way off in the distance, just one by himself. WĪsahkicâhk walked over to him and said, "Hey, paskwa mostos, my brother. Have you seen that bag of stories the Creator gave me? I think I lost them."*

*Buffalo shook his big shaggy head. He said, "Nooooooh, sorry, WĪsahkicâhk. I don't see much anymore. They keep me here in the park and people come to*

## PART 1: KAYÁS: A LONG TIME AGO

look at me. I don't get around like I used to. Nooooooh, I didn't see where you left your stories."

There was Wolf, running away from him. *Wísahkicâhk* shouted, "Hey, mahikan! My brother, stop, wait. Why are you always running away?"

Wolf stopped and came back. "I try to stay away from people now. Every time I come close, they shoot at me or try to poison me. What can I do for you, *Wísahkicâhk*?"

"I lost that bag of stories the Creator gave me. You didn't happen to see them, did you?"

"No, sorry, older brother," Wolf answered. "No, I'm sorry, I never saw your stories."

*Wísahkicâhk* kept looking. Next he saw Bear digging around in a garbage pit. He shouted down to him, "Hey, maskwa, my brother. What are you doing down there?"

Bear answered, "This is where I eat now. There's no forest left, there's no berries."

"Oh well, I guess that's the way it is. You didn't by chance happen to see where I left that bag of stories the Creator gave me, now, did you?"

"No, sorry, *Wísahkicâhk*. I never saw them. But maybe you never lost them. Maybe someone stole them like they stole my claws and my gall bladder."

That made sense to *Wísahkicâhk*. Of course, someone stole them. That must be what happened. That's how they ended up on that television.

He looked up and there was Bald Eagle flying. He yelled up at her, "Hey, mikisîw, my sister."

She circled around and around and slowly came down. When she landed in a tree just above *Wísahkicâhk*, he said, "Sister, you can see far. You can see

## WĪSAHKICÂHK'S LOST STORIES

*the future and you can see the past. Did you see who stole that bag of stories the Creator gave me back at the beginning of time?"*

*"Yes, I did, WĪSAHKICÂHK," she answered. "While you were watching television in the twentieth century Fox stole your stories."*

*"Ohhhhh yeah. That makes sense."*

*So WĪSAHKICÂHK went looking for Fox and he found him, and Fox had that bag of stories. He was dragging it around. WĪSAHKICÂHK knew he could never catch Fox. Fox was too fast, he could turn too quickly, and if WĪSAHKICÂHK chased him, maybe the stories would get hurt.*

*So he followed him and he found one of those stories. It had fallen out of the bag. Fox had dragged that bag of stories around for so long that he had worn a hole in it.*

*WĪSAHKICÂHK picked up that story. It was almost dead. Its fur was all matted and dirty, and it was hardly even breathing, It just lay there in WĪSAHKICÂHK's hands with its eyes closed. It was the Dream Catcher story.*

*WĪSAHKICÂHK brushed the dirt off it and he blew on it. Blew a little bit of life on it.*

*Slowly that story began to revive.*

*WĪSAHKICÂHK blew on it some more.*

*Finally that little story opened its eyes. It wasn't completely strong yet. But WĪSAHKICÂHK had a plan.*

*He used that story to make a whole bunch of dream catchers. They weren't very good because the story was so weak. But they were good enough. He sold them and he sold his buckskin jacket that he didn't wear anymore, and he sold his moccasins, and he used that money to buy the biggest big-screen TV he could find.*

## PART 1: KAYÂS: A LONG TIME AGO

*Then he took that big-screen TV into the forest and he plugged it into a currant bush.*

*And then he hid and waited.*

*Sure enough.*

*Along came Fox.*

*Curious Fox. He stopped to watch that big TV, and when he was completely hypnotized by it . . . Wisah-kicâhk stole back the bag of stories so that the people would know again how to live a good life.*



# PART 2

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**HOW ALCOHOL IS  
KILLING MY PEOPLE**

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# 1. SO THE STORY GOES

*tanisi ketayayak.* Hello, Elders.

*tanisi nimisak.* Hello, my older sisters.

*tanisi nistísak.* Hello, my older brothers.

*tanisi nisimisak.* Hello, all my younger brothers and sisters.

*tanisi kakithaw niwâhkomakinak.*

Hello, all my relatives.

**T**here is something important to talk about, something we have left out of our conversations, and now it is destroying us. There is a story that has been going around for a long time. The story is about the dirty, lazy, drunken Indian. The Queen's children have been telling this story about us ever since they came here. We were told this story when we went to residential schools, and though the media has somewhat toned it down as of late, this story is still repeated, and it is a story that we also tell to ourselves. It is the same story that is told about original peoples all over the world.

We once told our own stories about ourselves wherein we were the heroes. We were great hunters, providers, even warriors when need be. We were wise grandmothers and medicine people. We told stories

## PART 2: HOW ALCOHOL IS KILLING MY PEOPLE

about ourselves and about *mithosin kitaskinâw*—our beautiful land. The stories we told about ourselves and our beautiful land in fact had real effect. The stories connected us to the land and connected the land to us, and we became the same story.

But then the Queen's children came here and asked our ancestors if they could share this beautiful land with us. We adopted them in a ceremony of Treaty and they became our cousins.<sup>1</sup> Our name for them is *kiciwaman-awak*. It is a word that has no parallel in their language. It means all of us are cousins to all of them. *kiciwaman-awak* brought their own stories with them here. They brought the Jesus story and the money story, and they brought the alcohol story.