





TOWARDS
— *a Prairie* —
ATONEMENT

TREVOR HERRIOT
Afterword by Norman Fleury



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*To those who take up
the work of reconciliation*



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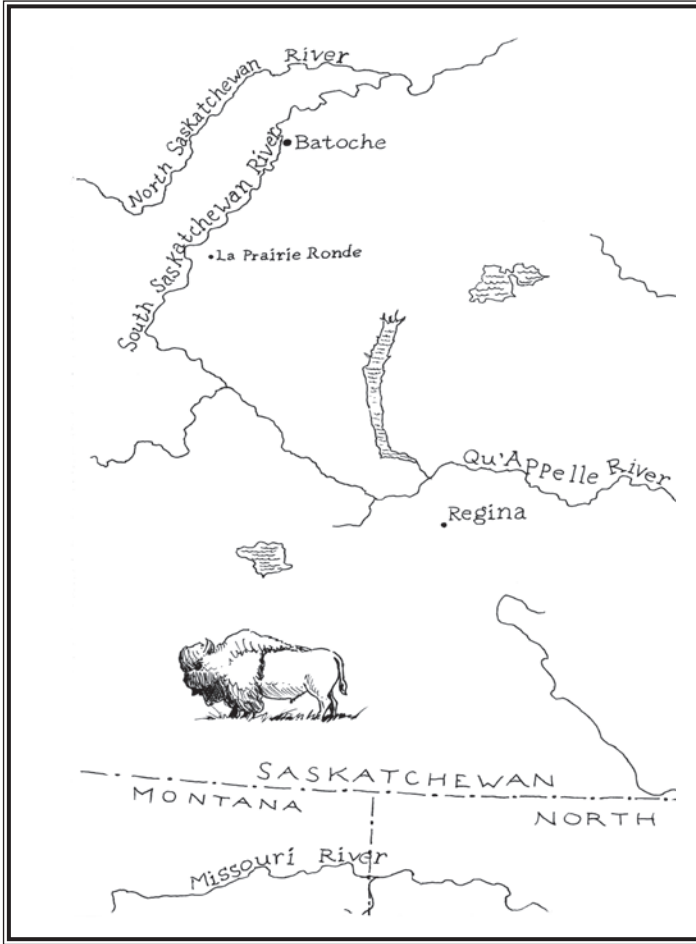
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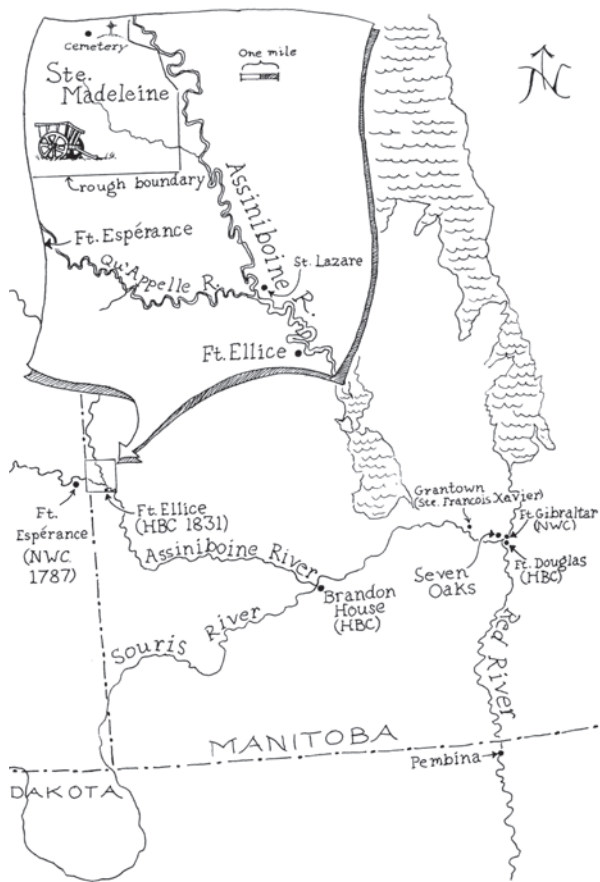
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RIVERS AND HISTORICAL SITES IN
Towards a Prairie Atonement



TIMELINE *of* EVENTS

1600s–1700s: The fur trade brings thousands of European men to the Canadian northwest. French and Scottish traders begin to intermarry with Cree, Saukteaux, and Assiniboine women. The Métis of the Canadian plains trace their kinship from these origins.

1670: The English Crown grants the Hudson's Bay Company a charter over Rupert's Land—all lands draining into Hudson Bay.

1787: The North West Company opens Fort Espérance in the Qu'Appelle Valley just upstream of the confluence with the Assiniboine River.

TIMELINE

1804: The trade war between the North West Company and Hudson's Bay Company begins.

1812: The Selkirk Colony is established at the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers—the first non-Indigenous settlement on what was to become the Canadian plains.

1814: The Pemmican Proclamation is issued by Miles Macdonell, Governor of Assiniboia, at the bidding of Lord Selkirk and the Hudson's Bay Company, placing Métis independence and rights in jeopardy.

FALL OF 1815: Governor Semple arrives at the Selkirk Colony.

MAY 8, 1816: Cuthbert Grant leads a group of Métis men east to accompany a shipment of pemmican past the Selkirk Colony to North West Company men waiting for supplies at Lake Winnipeg. The Métis flag is flown for the first time.

TIMELINE

JUNE 19, 1816: Grant's brigade is confronted by Semple and Selkirk settlers at Seven Oaks. The skirmish ends with twenty-two men dead.

JANUARY 10, 1817: Miles Macdonell retakes Fort Douglas (at present-day Winnipeg) for the Hudson's Bay Company.

1821: The North West Company and Hudson's Bay Company merge.

1820–60s: Métis buffalo hunting expeditions depart from the Red River.

1839: George Simpson is appointed governor of Rupert's Land and the Hudson's Bay Company.

1869: The government of Canada, the government of Great Britain, and the Hudson's Bay Company sign an agreement selling Rupert's Land to the Dominion of Canada. No one consults the thousands of Métis, First Nations, and settler people living in the region.

TIMELINE

- 1869–70: At the Red River, Louis Riel and his followers seize Fort Garry and establish a provisional government, asserting the Métis claim on the newly established District of Assiniboia—in what comes to be called the first Riel Resistance.
- 1880s: The last wild buffalo are hunted down to a small remnant.
- 1885: Louis Riel is elected president of the North-West Territories provisional government; after the Battle of Batoche, he is taken prisoner, tried, and executed on November 16 at Regina.
- 1900–02: Métis families begin settling around a new Ste. Madeleine mission established north of Fort Ellice by Oblate Father DeCorby.
- 1935: The Canadian government responds to the dust bowl of the Dirty Thirties by passing the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act, thereby establishing a community pasture system across Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

TIMELINE

1937-1938: The 250 Métis people living at Ste. Madeleine are told they will have to leave and resettle elsewhere because the land will be used for a new community pasture.

MARCH 2012: Stephen Harper's Conservative government ends the community pasture program, removing federal protection and programming for vulnerable grassland ecosystems.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One of the delights of reading a book is its physical presence in the hand—its size and heft, the tooth and shade of the paper stock, the way the inked words and images cast their shadows and set the negative space to vibrating. The small book has its own genius for concentrating the effect of each decision made by the editor and designer. Those decisions, when handled by staff at a small press, can sometimes produce a small book that binds its feel and appearance gracefully to the writer's text.

That was our shared hope when I began working with the University of Regina Press on this book: to create something that, while small compared with the

magnitude of its themes, is crafted to be congruent with the voices it bears. We wanted to give readers a story of loss that is the right size to hold and ponder—but, more important, the right size to reconcile.

If it works and we manage to achieve some of that coherence between form and content, then the credit goes entirely to my editor Karen Clark, publisher and irrepressible force of nature Bruce Walsh, designer Duncan Campbell, managing editor Donna Grant, copy editor Dallas Harrison, and the rest of the team at the University of Regina Press. They have all been enthusiastic, professional, and inspired from first to last, but it was Karen's skills, sensitivity, and unflagging dedication to the project that brought it into the light of day. I owe her every gratitude for the extra effort and hours she took on.

If this narrative—bound to a particular piece of prairie but interleaved with the larger matter of how we suppressed an emergent communal land tenure system on the northern Great Plains—reads only as a lament, then I have failed. I will take the blame for that and any other shortcomings and missteps herein, but I have set my heart on telling a story that will inspire people to take a second look at what we all lost, and

could yet restore, in our regard for more sophisticated and nuanced forms of land governance.

I am indebted to many people who have helped me to learn, think through, and articulate the subtleties that confound our comprehension of what has formed and what might reform our ways of owning and sharing land on the prairie. I want to especially acknowledge the tireless efforts and inspired leadership of North America's grassland conservationists, including my fellow travellers at Public Pastures—Public Interest.

Finally, and most emphatically, I offer my deep gratitude to Michif Elder, historian, and linguist Norman Fleury. His passion for his Michif language and people and confidence in their survival is in itself a testimony to the life that will endure and renew itself if we will but grant it room to flourish on these plains.



Whether we are indigenous or newcomer,
today our tipis are held down by the
same peg. Neither is going anywhere.
The knowledge and the will needed to
protect and save these places no longer
belongs to one people or one tradition.

—*Cynthia Chambers and Narcisse Blood,*
“Love Thy Neighbour: Repatriating
Precarious Blackfoot Sites”



— PART I —

ONE TENT PEG TO SHARE

Well, make sure you don't take it all.

—Qu'Appelle Valley farmer to people
from Pasqua First Nation gathering
blackroot (echinacea) on his land

The longspur, white tail feathers flashing, exploded into flight at our feet and then settled a short distance away. We stooped to look briefly at the swirl of green shade hiding her four speckled eggs, warm and holy. The wind all around us was strung with the bells of chestnut-collared longspur song, but this was the first nest we came upon.

If there is a world more complete and vulnerable than the nest of a small bird tucked into grass, I have not seen it. Walking the edge of a treeless plain a thousand acres across, I had to remind myself that there was a forest a few paces away. Like the longspur nest, it was concealed, recessed into the prairie in a great wooded trench, half a mile wide and three hundred feet deep. Yesterday, a biologist told me a story about a bow hunter who just last year mounted a tree stand in this valley above some bait he put out to attract bears. The first morning he climbed up into the stand, the bears started to come at daylight, and before he could make a move he was surrounded by forty-three of them. He was treed for much of the day waiting for the last ones to leave.

Down in the wooded bottomlands, the large mammals are faring well, but up here on this sandy plain the smaller creatures that depend on grass are rapidly thinning out. It is thus all the way from the Red River in Winnipeg to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Most of the remaining longspurs and other endangered grassland species are farther to the southwest where the Milk and Frenchman rivers drain the largest stretches of native grass on the northern Great Plains. This outlier of prairie, containing two publicly owned

community pastures of native grass and oak/poplar savannah, is a remote daughter cut off from her mother by hundreds of miles of cultivation.

For twenty years I have been making trips like this one, out onto the scattered archipelago of native prairie islands surrounded by a sea of cash crops, sometimes escaping from and sometimes searching for the hubris in our regard for the land, the arrogance that puts it to the plow and drives the birds away.

The pasture with the longspur nest is right on the Saskatchewan-Manitoba border and a few miles north of the Trans-Canada Highway, three hours east of my home in Regina. I caught a ride with Branimir Gjetvaj, a grassland naturalist and photographer working on a photography book that will feature the endangered grasslands of Canada's community pastures. As rare and ecologically important as coastal rainforest, and hosting thirty-one species at risk, they are officially listed by the World Commission on Protected Areas under the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as lands that Canada has made a commitment to protect. In the spring of 2012, however, the Stephen Harper government abandoned that commitment on behalf of all Canadians by ending the program and removing federal protection from these vulnerable landscapes.

That single legislative decision, destroying a grazing commons that was a model of conservation and sustainability, has set grassland conservationists and ranchers scrambling to find a way to prevent the privatization of more than eighty large grassland remnants in Saskatchewan and Manitoba that make up a land base of 9,300 square kilometres—nearly twice the size of Prince Edward Island.

I was recruited into the fray by a brown envelope that arrived in my mailbox shortly after the announcement. It was a package of information on the conservation programming of the pastures, with an anonymous note from a federal employee, asking me to help defend the birds and other creatures being placed at risk. I began talking to conservationists, and within a month we had formed a new advocacy group we called Public Pastures—Public Interest. The neo-liberal version of Canada created by the Harper Conservatives—a dark tunnel in which privileged white people slashed social services and environmental regulations and privatized the public good to cut taxes for elites and corporations—had always seemed just off stage, but now I was walking into it in the company of a couple of friends and some people I barely knew.

Four years into that tunnel, we believe we are seeing some light ahead. We have nearly fifty organizations and hundreds of supporters on our side, and we are meeting regularly with ranchers, environmental groups, First Nations organizations, and MPs to discuss ways to keep the pastures public lands managed for a mix of conservation and livestock grazing. Not long ago, during a week in which we lost a couple of key board members, including a close friend and a young First Nations man who hunts on the pastures, I was skimming through a chapter near the end of Thomas Berry's *Dream of the Earth*—an old book I often thumb through when I am trying to find my way in the dark.¹ At the bottom of a page discussing the need for Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities to connect by fostering the cultural traditions of First Peoples, I had many years ago scribbled something in the margin: “‘The Blackfoot and the white people here now share one tent peg.’ From Narcisse Blood, as told to me by Cynthia Chambers.”

Cynthia, a writer friend and university professor from Lethbridge, wanted to introduce Narcisse and me. I knew him by reputation as a Blackfoot Elder from the Blood Reserve and a filmmaker who had much to say about the role of culture and spirituality

in honouring the grassland world that had fed his people for uncounted generations. Over the years Narcisse and I had connected once or twice on email, but the timing had never worked out for a meeting. Then, in February 2015, it seemed as though we would finally get together. A phone message came early in the day from a friend, Michele Sereda: “Hi, Trevor. Sorry for the short notice, but I am working with Narcisse Blood and some others on a project. He reads your work and would like to meet you to talk about grassland. We are just heading out to Piapot for the day but could meet you at the Hotel Sask lounge at seven. Text or call me back.”

I tried calling Michele right away and didn’t get an answer so sent her a text message saying I would love to talk to Narcisse about grassland. That night I went to the lounge of the hotel and waited. An hour passed by. I called Michele again but got no answer. When I got home, the phone rang. It was my eldest daughter, Kate, who often worked with Michele in theatre. She was crying, barely able to speak: “Dad, Michele Sereda died in a car accident today.”

Narcisse, Michele, Michael Green (co-founder of Calgary’s One Yellow Rabbit theatre), and dancer Lacy Morin-Desjarlais had all been killed that morning, as

well as the driver of the truck they collided with on the icy highway to Piapot First Nation north of Regina.

In the days to come, I tried to learn more about the project the four artists had been working on. I knew Michele and her fearless commitment to collaborative processes and cross-cultural expressions from working with her on a play ten years earlier. Since then she had become a fixture in Indigenous theatre, inspiring young people to use the stage to bring their world to life in voice, movement, and story. As the weeks passed by, all I could find out was that she had brought the group together to create a performance piece aimed at uniting Indigenous and non-Indigenous people under treaty and with shared responsibilities to the land and one another.

At the memorial for Michele, several hundred people filling three galleries of the T. C. Douglas building's atrium, we wept together for the loss of her vibrancy, her unbounded enthusiasm, and her good heart. During the reception afterward, we filed by a screen showing film clips of Michele and then past tables with memorabilia, including her bulletin board, taken as it was, from her house. I glanced at it, smiling at the array of notes and reminders from a life filled with creativity and passion, and my eyes fell on a yellow sticky note. It was my phone number and a reminder to call.

Throughout that late winter and spring, Canadians would hear again and again about the need for decolonization and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission moved towards its conclusion. An artist-activist who had moved freely in both communities, Michele had been doing the work of reconciliation for years. To those of us who admired her courage and believed in what she was doing, that work suddenly seemed much more difficult but also much more urgent.

More than reconciliation, in someone like Michele there is a longing to come together, not to merge but to meet one another on level ground, distinct and equal, and to sing and dance together, sharing without taking. There is an English verb for this coming together when one side has more to give up and let go of—to *atone*. The power of *at-one-ment* has been covered up by the ashes of propitiatory fires from old religious narratives about an angry God demanding sacrifice for sin. Yet it is true: “sin” or estrangement is part of being human, and there is sacrifice in the work that brings us nearer to the place where we can be at one with the land and with one another across, but with deep respect for, all creaturely, cultural, and racial distinctions.