

Children of the Broken Treaty – Canada’s Lost Promise and One Girl’s Dream

By Charlie Angus – University of Regina Press -2015

It’s a scene worthy of our attention. In the chapter ***“Shannon meets Chuck”*** in his book, **Children of the Broken Treaty**, Charlie Angus describes the ill fated meeting in May 2008 between Shannon Koostachin and then Minister of Indian Affairs in the newly elected Harper government, Chuck Strahl. Thirteen year old Shannon and two other students from the James Bay Cree community of Attawapiskat are meeting Strahl in person to ask for a new school for their community. They bring the minister a gift, a jar of contaminated diesel oil soaked soil taken from the J.R. Nakogee elementary school. From the time of the oil leak in the 1980’s, the community has advocated for a new school to no avail. But now, finally, three grade eight students from Attawapiskat meet the minister responsible for their education and ask him for a new school. What happens next will break your heart and make you livid.

From the opening chapter ***“Duncan Campbell Scott Comes to James Bay”***, to the conclusion, Charlie Angus takes us on a trip through the history of broken promises between Canadian settler governments and the James Bay Mushkegowuk Cree First Nations. The story about Shannon Koostachin and **Shannon’s Dream** and the struggle for equitable funding for education for First nations communities forms the backdrop for the book but there is much more to digest. It’s a long and heartbreaking list: the duplicity behind signing Treaty 9 in 1905, residential schools, government underfunding of basic community needs for clean water and sanitation, adequate housing, education, lack of respect for the cultural, spiritual, social and familial structures of the James Bay Cree. It’s a hard read.

I think the question for non-indigenous people who take the time and emotional effort to read this book is simply this; will knowing this painful history make any difference going forward? Does being confronted by the painful past relationship between settler and First Peoples of Turtle Island enable the necessary changes needed to right the wrongs? Certainly one of the outcomes is never again can we say, “I didn’t know.”

I recommend adding Charlie Angus’s book to the list which continue to fill in what cross cultural Anishinabe educator Maurice Switzer describes as ***The Missing Chapter***. Sadly the hardships encountered by James Bay Cree continue to put the future of their children in question. But when Chuck Strahl told Shannon Koostachin in May 2008 that building a new school in Attawapiskat wasn’t part of the government agenda, she replied, “I looked him straight in the eyes and said, ‘Oh, we’re not going to quit, we’re not going to give up.’” Shannon was right. They didn’t give up and Charlie concludes, “On a bright blue and crisp September day in 2014, I saw a possible future for the children of Treaty 9 territory. I sensed it as soon as I walked through the doors of the beautiful new elementary school in Attawapiskat.” (Pg. 284)

Reviewed by Elizabeth Frazer Summer 2016