

provinces have exhibited a tendency in the constitutional conferences to stonewall federal initiatives for increased self-government and land claim settlements. A major problem confronting Indian leaders is how to deal with the provinces without effecting their historic trust relationship with the federal government. An equally important problem is how Indian leaders can prevent the future of their peoples from being determined through bilateral provincial-federal negotiations, where Indians are de facto excluded from the bargaining process.

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Anastasia M. Shkilnyk: *A Poison Stronger Than Love: The Destruction of an Ojibwa Community*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985. 275 pages.

Anastasia Shkilnyk's book on the plight of the Northern Ojibwa of Grassy Narrows fails to achieve the level of paramount importance that it should. In describing the impact of community relocation and mercury poisoning on these people, Shkilnyk provides some important new information, particularly on the relocation of the community, and this is what gives the book its value. However, the book has numerous problems which greatly detract from the significance of the Grassy Narrows story. It is not an understatement to describe the unfortunate circumstances of these people as the "destruction" of their community and culture. But the true significance of the volume is only alluded to by the author: Grassy Narrows is not unique.

The impact of industrialization and government administration in the north has been pervasive, and few case studies similar to Shkilnyk's treatment of Grassy Narrows have emerged. The process that has served to destroy this community actually has two foci. First, in 1964, the community was forced by the federal Department of Indian Affairs to relocate to a new reserve. Second, in 1970, the announcement was made that over the previous ten year period, the chlor-alkali plant of Dryden

Chemicals Ltd. had contaminated the English-Wabigoon River system with mercury. The river system, crucial to the domestic and commercial fishing and trapping activities of the Grassy Narrows people, was closed, and the people advised not to eat fish. The combined impact of these events was so strong that it dealt a potentially irreversible blow to the cultural fabric of the community.

A strong aspect of Shkilnyk's book is her treatment of the relocation, an integral component of the overall destruction of the community which was little-known, and shrouded by the media attention accompanying the mercury pollution. Relocation was a common process experienced by Native communities in the 1960s, and virtually no attention was paid to the possible negative consequences. As Shkilnyk points out, these relocations were for "the good of the community": new infrastructural and administrative services were to be provided to "upgrade" the reserves.¹ Implicit in the relocation program, as witnessed in Grassy Narrows and other Native communities, was the desire to make Native people more like white people. Shkilnyk notes that the relocation "gave government planners a free hand to rearrange people, houses, and community facilities in line with their own concepts of what was modern and economically efficient,"² which inevitably meant the establishment of "a townsite similar in layout to any white town."³ This townsite format is typical of most northern Native communities today, and their houses situated close together in neat rows present a stark contrast to the settlement pattern of the pre-relocation era.

In reading Shkilnyk's description of the relocation, one familiar with northern Native communities might get an enormous sense of deja vu. A direct parallel can be drawn between Grassy Narrows and many other Native communities: the story is the same, only the names have changed. Unfortunately, the opportunity to draw comparisons with other relocated communities eludes Shkilnyk, and we are left to wonder just how pervasive was this process. A significant body of literature exists on the impact of relocation for Native communities which the author has failed

to consult.⁴ An excellent comparison can be drawn between Grassy Narrows and the Cree community of Easterville, Manitoba. In fact, the similarities are uncanny. Both were relocated in 1964; both were moved from a lush environment to one characterized predominantly by rock upon which nothing could grow; both were promised a wide variety of services as a result of the relocation; both received few of these services (especially striking is the fact that sewer and water systems could not be constructed in either community, due to the expense of blasting through the rock); both were redesigned as urban townsites; both experienced social upheaval as a result; and both experienced mercury pollution a few years after the relocation.

Shkilnyk's description of the manner in which the relocation violated Northern Ojibwa cultural concepts of space, and man-environment relationships, is another strong part of the book. The remains of pre-relocated Native communities usually demonstrate a well-defined, though dispersed, pattern. As Shkilnyk points out, in the case of Grassy Narrows, certain regions of the old reserve were the property of specific clans. Although no official boundaries were ever established, clan territory was consciously recognized and respected. When the community was relocated, the residents were intermingled with no consideration of clan affiliation. Houses, once great distances from each other, but all with direct access to the river, were relocated close together, many with no direct access to their new lake. The result was an increase in inter-personal tension and conflict. Further, to add to the violation of Northern Ojibwa cultural norms, the new reserve was widely acknowledged to be the home of a "bad spirit."⁵ According to these people, this fact alone was enough to ensure that trouble would soon follow.

The people's fears soon became reality. As their culture was reeling under the assault of new spatial patterns and the demands of a new environment, the news of mercury pollution in the English-Wabigoon River system reached the community. The commercial and domestic fishing operations and many tourist facilities on the river system were closed, and many Grassy

Narrows people lost employment. Subsequently, they were urged by Ontario Government officials not to eat the poisonous fish. The community's economy collapsed.

Again, Shkilnyk misses the opportunity to place the mercury contamination issue within a broader context. Mercury pollution has become an insidious problem for northern Native people for a variety of reasons, and commercial fisheries have been temporarily closed all across the north. In fact, Native communities all along the Saskatchewan River system (Easterville, Grand Rapids, Moose Lake, The Pas, Cumberland House), and the Churchill-Nelson River system (South Indian Lake, Nelson House, Cross Lake, Oxford House) have experienced problems with mercury contamination. None of these communities received the enormous publicity that Grassy Narrows has received, but the impact of the pollution was no less devastating.

On the mercury issue, Shkilnyk states profoundly that "the politics of mercury left an imprint on the community every bit as cruel and demoralizing as the poison in the river."⁶ The news media found an explosive story in Grassy Narrows. Enormous rage was generated by environmentalists and Natives alike, and a great debate raged between them and the industrialists and elected officials who denied that the pollution caused any serious problems. The community was flooded by politicians, both Native and non-Native, journalists, doctors, and members of other interest groups, all of whom had their own ideas of how the community should respond to their latest dilemma. However, despite the great attention which the problem received, real solutions were not forthcoming. Shkilnyk states:

After more than a decade of meetings, briefs, submissions, pleadings, and formal and informal negotiations for just compensation for damages to life and livelihood, the Grassy Narrows people have gained little more than platitudinous programs designed to placate.⁷

In fact, Shkilnyk implies that the situation of the Grassy Narrows people deteriorated significantly as a result of this politicking. For instance, the community lost the opportunity to have an epidemiologic study conducted, due to the bungling of their advisors, the Anti-Mercury Ojibway Group. As Shkilnyk

notes, "... they had been made pawns in a game of high stakes that was supposedly being played for their benefit."⁸ This exploitation went even further in the eyes of community residents, since the constant parade of outsiders, and continuous discussion of their community, had made them infamous. Indeed, two major works published at the time made Grassy Narrows a household word by intertwining the political scandal of mercury pollution in Ontario with the devastation of Minamata Disease in Japan.⁹ If we are to believe Shkilnyk, the people did not want this kind of attention. She writes,

They resented having the horror of their community's social pathology exposed to the rest of the world.¹⁰

This being the case, we must ask the inevitable question: how is Shkilnyk's book any different?

As an examination of the Grassy Narrows debacle, Shkilnyk's book is by far the most comprehensive. The "horror" of the community's social pathology has been analyzed from every angle, supported by hard data on suicides, alcohol abuse, child abuse, and so on. Included are many photographs, some of which highlight this social pathology, including one easily-recognizable individual involved in a "pathological" activity. (One cannot resist the comparison of this photograph with those found in Eleanor Jacobson's racist diatribe, Bended Elbow,¹¹ concerning transient Indian behavior in Kenora, referred to by Shkilnyk as "highly partisan and harshly negative."¹² It would be interesting to learn what Shkilnyk perceives her own role in Grassy Narrows to have been, and her justification for this book in light of her condemnation of others who have written of the Grassy Narrows story. She writes that,

the parade of "helpers" who came through the community breached the invisible barriers against unwanted visitors with a vengeance, because, as it turns out, most of the visitors came to satisfy their own curiosity and then moved on to more fashionable disasters.¹³

Within her own intellectual tradition as a graduate student and a development specialist, a "helper" who arrived in Grassy Narrows and eventually moved on to a position with the federal government, how can she fail to recognize her own special

interests, as evidenced in her expose of the "horrors" of Grassy Narrows?

A Poison Stronger Than Love is a marginal book which tells an important story. No doubt it will be read by a large audience, who will once again be outraged at the tragedy being experienced by these people. Favourable reviews of the book have already surfaced in the popular press, including that of Robert Fulford in Saturday Night,¹⁴ who refers to the book as a "classic of the social sciences" and compares it to George Orwell's The Road to Wigan Pier, and Oscar Lewis' The Children of Sanchez.

Yet, one cannot help but think that an important opportunity has been lost. While the Grassy Narrows story needed to be told, Shkilnyk commits a number of serious errors which will ensure that the book never becomes a "classic." First, as already described above, she fails to place the book within a national context. Second, she relies unquestioningly on government statistics which are of dubious merit. For instance, the use of Social Services data on child apprehensions must be questioned, especially in light of recent Native criticism regarding the applicability of non-Native standards of parental suitability for Natives. Third, she primarily utilizes classic, but archaic, anthropological literature, especially the work of R.W. Dunning and A.I. Hallowell, while ignoring the extensive contemporary literature on the Northern Ojibwa and the impact of industrial development in the north. Finally, she falls victim to the fatal error of relying upon the "experts," outsiders with some knowledge of the community who are perhaps more articulate than the local people, but who have not had to live the problems they describe. Surely, after two and one-half years in the community, Shkilnyk could offer more insight into how the residents themselves feel about their plight.

Perhaps the most intriguing question left by the book is how the people of Grassy Narrows feel about it. The book tells an important story, but in light of recent financial settlements with the Grassy Narrows Band concerning the mercury pollution, it is questionable that it will be of benefit to them. It may

sensitize others as to the plight of Native people in Canada, although the analogy is not well-made by the author. Poetic hopes that the story can "serve as a warning"¹⁵ about our responsibility to the earth are not likely to be realized. For the people of Grassy Narrows, the revival of their pre-relocation and pre-mercury culture is the consequence of primary importance.

Notes

¹ Anastasia M. Shkilnyk, A Poison Stronger Than Love: The Destruction of an Ojibwa Community (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), p.170.

² Shkilnyk, p. 167.

³ Shkilnyk, p. 170.

⁴ See, for example: Phil Dickman, "Thoughts on Relocation," Musk-Ox, 6 (1969), 21-31, and "Spatial Change and Relocation," in Developing the Subarctic, ed. John Rogge (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba, 1973), pp.145-174; Ravindra Lal, "From Duck Lake to Camp 10: Old Fashioned Relocation," Musk-Ox, 6 (1969), 5-13, and "Some Observations on the Social Life of the Chipewyans of Camp 10, Churchill, and Their Implications for Community Development," Musk-Ox, 6 (1969), 14-20; Michael Landa, "Easterville: A Case Study in the Relocation of a Manitoba Native Community," Thesis Univ. of Manitoba 1969; Joseph E. Trimble, "Forced Migration: Its Impact on Shaping Coping Strategies," in Uprooting and Development, ed. G. Coehlo and P. Ahmed (New York: Plenum, 1980), pp.449-478; James B. Waldram, "Relocation and Social Change Among the Swampy Cree and Metis of Easterville, Manitoba," Thesis Univ. of Manitoba 1980, and "Relocation and Political Change in a Manitoba Native Community," Canadian Journal of Anthropology, 1, No.2 (1980), 173-178.

⁵ Shkilnyk, p. 71.

⁶ Shkilnyk, p. 199.

⁷ Shkilnyk, p. 206.

⁸ Shkilnyk, p. 216.

⁹ Warner Troyer, No Safe Place (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1977); George Hutchison and Dick Wallace, Grassy Narrows (Toronto: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1977).

¹⁰ Shkilnyk, p. 216.

¹¹ Eleanor Jacobson, Bended Elbow (Kenora: Central Publications, 1976).

¹² Shkilnyk, p. 252.

¹³ Shkilnyk, p. 238.

¹⁴ Robert Fulford, "Displaced Persons," Saturday Night, May 1985.

¹⁵ Shkilnyk, p. 242.

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