

Indigenous people who struggled for rights

a short list by CPT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES SOLIDARITY TEAM

By listening to historic and contemporary Indigenous activists, artists, land defenders, and language preservers, we understand why the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is so vital. Every Indigenous right recognized in the Declaration has been routinely and systematically trampled on – and this has been justified by Settler society.



THE POWHATAN LEGAL RESISTANCE TO IMPERIAL CLAIMS

In the early 1600s, the English laid claim to traditional Powhatan territory, what is now eastern Virginia. The Powhatans, part of the larger Algonquin peoples, responded by launching a sophisticated set of legal arguments concerning title over the contested territory, based on their attachment to the land (“from time immemorial”), and their current use and occupation of it. Their story reminds us that Indigenous resistance through law is not a recent phenomenon.



MISTAHI-MASKWA ENSURING SURVIVAL, ENDURING STARVATION

A Cree chief, Mistahi-maskwa (1825–1888) was the son of Black Powder. He opposed Treaty 6 and the creation of reserves, foreseeing the intended limitations on cultural rights and his band’s ability to move freely to hunt. Mistahi-maskwa refused to sign the Treaty for years, but was forced to do so by starvation conditions imposed by the Canadian state.



DESKAHEH TEACHING THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY ABOUT INDIGENOUS NATIONHOOD

“We want none of your laws and customs that we have not willingly adopted for ourselves. We have adopted many. You have adopted some of ours – votes for women, for instance.”

Deskaheh (1873–1925) was a Haudenosaunee chief (Cayuga). In the 1920s, he brought Haudenosaunee concerns to the League of Nations and spoke widely about Europe’s obligation to the First Peoples of Turtle Island under the Two Row Wampum. Despite Canada’s opposition, Deskaheh’s dedication and skills as an orator brought awareness of the rights of Indigenous Nations.



RITA JOE THE POWER OF LANGUAGE AND TRUE REPRESENTATION

“I have to call attention to the gentle people of Canada. My song is gentle, bear with me. I still want to offer my hand in friendship, the Indian of today.”

Rita Joe (1932–2007) was a poet from Cape Breton’s Eskasoni First Nation reserve, known as “the poet laureate of the Mi’kmaq people.” Her poetry represents her community as creative, strong, and positive in social resistance to stereotypes and assimilation thinking.



MARY TWO-AXE EARLEY UNDOING COLONIAL CONTROL THROUGH REJECTION OF PATRIARCHY

A Mohawk born in Kahnawake, Quebec (1911), Mary Two-Axe Earley was instrumental to the Indigenous feminist movement, helping change patriarchal Canadian law to ensure equal status, rights, and access for First Nations women. After campaigning for 20 years with the support of other Indigenous women like Sandra Lovelace, Bill C-31 was passed on June 28, 1985, amending the Indian Act and restoring the status of thousands of women and their children.



BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE CELEBRATING CULTURE, SURVIVAL, AND RECONNECTION

“Instead of kids just hearing about beads and baskets and fringe, and about what ‘was’ and ‘were,’ we present Native American culture as a living contemporary culture.”

Originally from the Piapot Plains Cree First Nation Reserve in Saskatchewan, Buffy Sainte-Marie (b. 1941) was adopted by a family in Massachusetts, returning to and reconnecting with her community in her 20s. Known as an artist and musician, she is a visible human rights activist for Indigenous communities throughout Turtle Island, using her fame to bring light to the treatment of First Peoples and their rich and enduring culture.



FRANK CALDER ASSERTING INHERENT RIGHTS

A Nisga’a chief, provincial politician, and residential school survivor whose name lives on in the 1973 Calder decision of the Supreme Court of Canada, a landmark ruling that recognized the existence of Aboriginal law and land title. This overturned – in principle – the Doctrine of Discovery concept that Euro-Christian land claims erased existing title and changed the legal-political landscape with regard to treaty and inherent rights, not just in Canada but worldwide.



AUDREY HUNTLEY REFUSING TO FORGET THE MISSING AND MURDERED

“This is a mourning that must be made public despite efforts to silence, erase, and displace those who are Indigenous, and to stand in the way of ongoing genocidal policies and destruction of the land, our mother.”

Audrey Huntley is a storyteller, activist, and advocate who has been calling for action on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) since the 1990s. Of mixed European settler and Anishinaabe ancestry, Huntley is a founder of No More Silence, which supports families in the legal and political struggle for justice and recognition of the ongoing violence towards Indigenous women and girls.



THOMAS KING TELLING STORIES THAT DEFY IGNORANCE

“Take [this] story, for instance. Do with it what you will. Tell it your friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget it. But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now.”

Thomas King (b. 1943) is Cherokee artist who uses literature to challenge issues that impact Indigenous rights throughout Turtle Island, including land theft, restriction of rights and status, and the gross misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples in mainstream media throughout the world.



CINDY BLACKSTOCK EXPOSING RACISM AGAINST CHILDREN

“Reconciliation means not having to say sorry a second time”

Cindy Blackstock is a member of the Gitksan First Nation and the Executive Director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada. Her work offers community and culturally-based responses to the Federal Government’s inadequate provision of welfare and services for Indigenous children, including a human rights challenge.



SYLVIA MCADAM, JESSICA GORDON, NINA WILSON, & SHEELAH MCLEAN ACTIVATING A GENERATION TO TAKE TO THE STREETS

#IdleNoMore was the rallying cry that began in the Prairies with these three Indigenous women and their Settler friend and ally. Calling for cultural resistance to Bill C-45, an omnibus budget bill which enabled new Federal jurisdiction over Indigenous land and resources to the detriment of the environment, Idle No More inspired international response and solidarity with protests from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan to Stockholm, Sweden.



THE CLAN MOTHERS OF GRASSY NARROWS FIRST NATION WORKING FOR THE FUTURE GENERATIONS

“Our culture is a land-based culture, and the destruction of the land is the destruction of our culture.”
— Roberta Keesick, Clan Mother, Blockader, Trapper.

They are defenders of land and water, educators, activists, teachers, and powerful voices. They are mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, and friends. Their tools are the drum, the song, the camera, the medicines and the land, and the alliances formed in the years of struggle to protect Grassy Narrows First Nation (about 100 kilometres northeast of Kenora, ON) from clear-cut logging, mercury poisoning, and the loss of hunting territory.

An excerpt from
**WRONGS
TO
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a special edition of
INTOTEMAK
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Explore more on how
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commonword.ca/go/508

Christian Settlers who honoured Indigenous rights

a short list by STEVE HEINRICHS

The Settler Church has done much harm to Indigenous peoples. Yet, alongside the dark and dominant stories of betrayal (stories we need to know and embrace), there are also small, alternative narratives that we can draw inspiration from – stories of Settler Christians who walked in solidarity with host peoples.



BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS 1484–1566

The Dominican friar publicly opposes the horrific violence of Spanish colonists, defending the humanity and rights of West Indies Indigenous peoples. Las Casas is far from perfect – at one time he lifts up the African slave trade as a way to offset the oppression of native communities (a view which he later recanted) – but his decades of persistent activism changes how westerners view the legal status of native peoples.



WILLIAM PENN 1644–1718

Penn receives a Charter from the British Crown for his Quaker colony, but moved by a concern for justice and friendship he seeks out the Delaware – the Indigenous people who held jurisdiction to the territory – and establishes his community through a series of treaties. Penn's dealings are soon held up as embodying the most advanced recognition of "Aboriginal and treaty rights."



PHILADELPHIA YEARLY MEETING 1763

Disturbed by fellow Christians who were settling on contested lands, the Quaker Philadelphia meeting decides to prohibit such activity: "Friends should not purchase nor remove to settle such lands as have not been fairly and openly first purchased from Indians by those persons who are or may be fully authorized by the government to make such purchases." Two weeks later, the Royal Proclamation of King George III comes into effect, creating a vast Indian Reserve west of the Appalachians. The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting actually withholds membership from fellow Christians who move west, in violation of the royal decree.



ABORIGINES PROTECTION SOCIETY (APS) 1836–1909

Driven by the energies and influence of many women, the APS is an international humanitarian rights organization that seeks to defend the interests of Indigenous peoples, especially within the British Empire. Critics rightly point out that it often proposes policy solutions about First Nations without First Nations and is imbued with assimilationist goals. *That cannot be excused.* Yet it should be noted that the APS resists British attempts at relocating Indigenous communities, repeatedly calls the government to honour Treaties, speaks out against British Columbia's neglect of Native title, and even purchases lands for Mi'kmaq peoples on the East Coast.



REVEREND ARTHUR E. O'MEARA 1861–1928

A missionary in the Yukon and British Columbia, O'Meara works tirelessly to have the Indigenous rights of the western First Nations recognized by the government of Canada. Though mocked and bullied by colonial authorities, he is steadfast, using his position in the church to pursue justice for the Cowichan, the Nisga'a, and the Allied Tribes of British Columbia as their legal counsel. O'Meara even travels to England to carry an Indigenous petition to the Crown in 1909.



ELAINE GOODALE EASTMAN 1863–1953

Partner to the Dakota doctor Ohiyesa (Charles Eastman), Elaine Goodale fights against the removal of Native American children to distant boarding schools, while starting a day school on a Dakota reservation. Goodale also collaborates with her husband to record his story which powerfully communicates both the beauty of Dakota lifeways and the impact of assimilation and racism on Dakota communities.



IAN MACKENZIE 1969

Mackenzie, an Anglican priest, connects with Bob Thomas, a Cherokee organizer and activist, and together they seek to bridge the religious divide between Christians and traditionalists, a divide that has fractured many Indigenous communities. From 1970 to 1992, the *Indian Ecumenical Conference* comes together, building friendships, understanding, and new collaborations. For Mackenzie, it is an opportunity for Christians "to begin to learn something about how to live their own religion from Indians."



ECUMENICAL SUPPORT FOR THE AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT 1960S–70S

Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist and other church communities send tens of thousands of dollars to support Native American activist agendas. In late March of 1973, during the reclamation of Wounded Knee, 4,000 people attend a special mass on behalf of Native Americans at New York's St. John the Divine Cathedral.



PROJECT NORTH 1970S

Project North – sponsored by the Anglican, Lutheran, Mennonite, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and United churches – seeks to come alongside Indigenous communities in their struggles around land claims and Northern development. One significant battle they wage concerns the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline. In solidarity with the Dene, Project North embraces a "moratorium" position, which is adopted by Judge Thomas Berger.



ELAINE BISHOP AND BETTY PETERSON 1988

Having sought justice in the courts for over a decade, the Lubicon Cree in northern Alberta assert their sovereignty by setting up a peaceful blockade in their territory. The blockade shuts down all oil extraction and raises the ire of big business and the RCMP. Standing with the Lubicon are Settler allies, including Elaine Bishop and Betty Peterson – two Quaker women. Six days later, the RCMP officers forcibly remove the barricades and arrest Elaine, Betty, and 26 other resisters. Though put in jail, they are later released when the judge refuses to board a special plane provided by the province to get to the remote community.



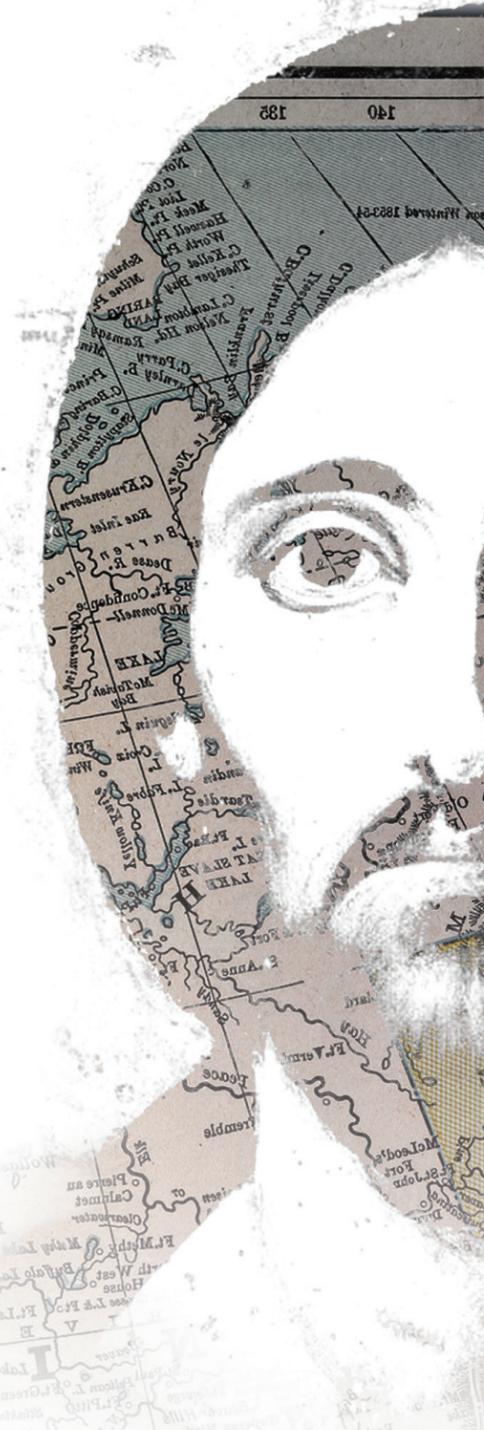
CHRISTIAN PEACEMAKER TEAMS 1999

Asubpeeschoseewagong (Grassy Narrows) First Nations sets up a blockade to resist the ongoing deforestation of their traditional territory and violation of Treaty rights. Christian Peacemaker Teams is invited to join them on the blockades... and continues the working friendship to this day.



KAIROS CANADA 2011

In 2007, the Canadian government votes against the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Churches had been working for a long time, behind the scenes, in support of the *Declaration*. In 2011, KAIROS – the largest ecumenical social justice organization in Canada – organizes a march of 350 banners through Ottawa calling for its implementation.



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