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Review of First Nations, First Thoughts: The Impact of Indigenous Thought in Canada edited by Annis May Timpson

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This timely collection offers perceptive, thought-provoking perspectives on contemporary issues Indigenous communities face. Privatization, governance, language preservation, museums, public policy, and official knowledge are some of the topics the book tackles. Written by a range of seasoned and emerging scholars, First Nations, First Thoughts is organized into five subject areas (each containing two or three papers): challenging dominant discourses; oral histories; cultural representation; governance; and political self-determination. The title is a clever response to Thomas Flanagan’s First Nations? Second Thoughts (2000). One of the articles rebuts the content of this infamous, rather anti-Indigenous-sovereignty book. Because Flanagan is consulted on issues of public policy by conservative-leaning governments, Indigenous peoples believe it important to counter his proposals. Throughout the book notions such as reclaim, revision, return, reconstitute, and resist come to mind.

In part 1 Robin Brownlie and Margaret Kovach describe the isolation and challenges of working in a non-Indigenous university. Aboriginal professors perform the dual functions of being role models and challenging and changing institutional barriers for their students. Non-Aboriginal researchers can assist and lead by being open to Aboriginal narrative structures and epistemologies. Part 2 asks the reader to consider the ways in which the oral history of Indigenous communities continues to challenge educators.

Often the bane of Indigenous peoples, museum issues and appropriate representation are taken up by Stephanie Bolton, Laura Peers, and Alison Brown in part 3. Rather than regarding Indigenous peoples as historical curiosities to be viewed in the past, museums must represent Indigenous peoples as culturally dynamic communities capable of partnering in their own representation. The authors describe how a museum project gave the researcher and the researched an opportunity to work together with a creative and community-inclusive methodology.

Part 4 examines the issue of governance and the experience of Native peoples. Feona MacDonald describes some cautionary measures when First Nations take over child welfare services. Sovereignty can often mean letting the state off the hook and expecting First Nation communities to provide services with fewer resources and without any of the benefits mainstream services provide such as infrastructure, adequate funding, and trade union gains. Once public services are privatized it is extremely
difficult to reinstate them in the public domain. Institutional design, language promotion, and cultural recognition must be considered when developing an Indigenous-oriented public service. Elder consultation will ensure that future generations connect to the source of cultural knowledge and thought. Long-term strategies and investment in Aboriginal education are necessary prerequisites to the “browning of the civil service,” as the Nunavut example proposes. Development must mean more than just the accumulation of profits; it must also include the rights of Indigenous peoples to a land base that remains intact in order to provide for future generations.

The book’s final two chapters nicely summarize Indigenous willingness to build bridges with non-Indigenous citizens so that all Canadians can realize the benefits of full citizenship. This will become a reality when non-Indigenous Canadians truly understand the unique history, contributions, and constitutional rights that have been fought for and gained by Indigenous peoples. It is essential to create working relationships built on mutual respect and accommodation.

An analysis of the important role and impact of the media on public discourse and policy might have added significantly to the volume’s value. Overall, First Nations, First Thoughts is an excellent contribution to the field of Native Studies, raising current issues that First Nations, Métis, and mainstream governments are grappling with and will continue to confront well into the future. I highly recommend it.

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