

Book Review

Sovereignty's Entailments: First Nation State Formation in the Yukon.
By Paul Nadasdy. University of Toronto Press, 2017. 400 pages.

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Land claims in the Yukon are not often described in the terms that Paul Nadasdy uses in his 2017 book, *Sovereignty's Entailments: First Nation State Formation in the Yukon*. Commonly referred to as achievements on the path to reconciliation, Nadasdy instead concludes that these agreements are “extensions of the colonial project.” Based on his immersion in a Yukon community, both during Final Agreement negotiations and afterward, *Sovereignty's Entailments* is a detailed anthropological examination of the cultural impacts resulting from land claim negotiations. Studying the terms sovereignty, territory, citizenship, nation, and time, Nadasdy argues that the Yukon Final and Self-Government agreements began as an effort to protect Yukon First Nation ways of life, but have instead resulted in fundamental changes to how First Nations people understand themselves and interact with each other and their environments. These descriptions sit uncomfortably alongside the agreements' more mainstream narrative. Ultimately, this contrast inspires reflection, placing big questions in front of the reader, asking them to consider the cultural impacts of these projects and whether the work can be done differently.

Nadasdy's argument that the Final Agreements have had a radical transformative impact in the territory is persuasive. Though the theory behind his reasons may not always be accessible to non-academic audiences, Nadasdy makes a strong case for the idea that the Yukon's land claims are not neutral descriptions of First Nations life prior to contact with Europeans. Rather, *Sovereignty's Entailments* argues that land claims have created new concepts and vocabularies

that have changed First Nations Peoples' cultures and political structures. Where previously First Nations Peoples organized themselves along kinship lines, now the agreements have imposed the idea of nationality and citizenship. Where land use was once fluid, now it is organized into discrete territories with fixed boundaries. These definitions and boundaries create new opportunities for inclusion, but also for exclusion, shaping the way First Nations people identify and interact with one another.

Nadasdy's consistent refrain is that sovereignty, and all of the ancillary pieces that come with it, is rooted in a deeply Western way of thinking. In order to achieve land claims, Nadasdy argues that Yukon First Nations Peoples had to drastically modify their existence to adapt to concepts that did not correspond to their existing world views. This process started with negotiations, but continues even now that negotiations are complete.

Nadasdy's arguments stand in stark contrast to the more congratulatory tone that typically characterizes the conversations that occur in the Yukon when describing the territory's land claims. These conversations typically begin in a different place: rather than starting before European contact, they begin in 1973. This was the year a delegation, led by Chief Elijah Smith, ignited Yukon land claims negotiations by laying the Yukon First Nations vision—*Together Today for our Children Tomorrow*—in the hands of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau. The goal of this vision was to create space for Yukon First Nations in an already altered cultural landscape:

The objective of the Yukon Indian people is to obtain a Settlement in place of a treaty that will help us and our children learn to live in a changing world.

By the time this narrative reaches 2017, the Supreme Court of Canada, in discussing Yukon land claims, was echoing the complicated aspirations found in *Together Today for our Children Tomorrow*, mixed with notes of the Court's own vision of Aboriginal law: with reconciliation as the goal, the Yukon agreements are intended both to atone for past behaviours and to build a more successful forward-looking relationship (see e.g., *First Nation of Nacho Nyak Dun v Yukon* at para 10; and *Beckman v Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation* at para 10). Though the land claims were not the final goal in and of themselves, they are a step on the path toward reconciling. The work to develop stronger relationships and a shared society continues, but this step was a big one—a quantum leap—toward establishing a collective future together (*Beckman v Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation* at para 12).

The dissonance between the perspective in *Sovereignty's Entailments* and the perspective reflected in modern case law is plain. One paints the agreements as failures, covertly perpetrating a cultural coup that they claim to be trying to avoid. The other sketches an image of ongoing success, with different groups working together in a shared framework to reconcile disparate world views.

It is well beyond the aims of this book review to conclude which of these views is correct, if such a determination is even possible. But regardless of which two of these narratives rings true for the reader, the gap between them, which is exposed in *Sovereignty's Entailments*, creates an opportunity for reflection. Lines have been drawn, and this changes the way in which Yukon First Nations Peoples think of the world; living and working in the North, it is a perspective that is easy to lose in daily life. While life in the North regularly requires considering and interpreting the agreements' meaning, Nadasdy's book is a wider viewpoint than any one situation tends to require; it is a call to consider land claims work in the North on the whole. This reflective space is uncomfortable and gives rise to questions that go to the heart of how to identify as a territory, and even as a country.

Sovereignty's Entailments, in its contrast with the usual descriptions of modern land claims, uncovers difficult questions—What are the agreements' goals? If the goals are multifaceted, how do we balance them? Are there other ways to achieve the agreements' aims? Can any of the agreements' impacts be undone? Is some measure of cultural impact inherent in reconciliation? Unfortunately, none of these questions have ready answers and it is not clear who should be answering them, but there is value in taking the time to consider them and in creating a space and a reason to have the conversations that they invite.

In addition to its value in the field of anthropology, Nadasdy's specific focus on the Yukon agreements is intended as a case study for others working on land claims. While his ideas can be difficult, they are nonetheless important. His comments challenge the dominant narrative of modern land claims as a means for reconciliation, instead focusing on their failure to preserve Yukon First Nations' cultures. Whether or not this approach reflects the reader's understanding of what the agreements are meant to do, *Sovereignty's Entailments* certainly inspires reflection—about what the Yukon agreements have achieved, about the motivations behind them, and about what can be done differently in future situations. They pose difficult questions that should be discussed in the Yukon as it moves forward with its model, and in other jurisdictions that are working toward solutions to their own unique situations.

At a minimum, Nadasdy's work serves as a reminder of what is at stake in the negotiations for land claims. The resulting documents are tectonic: they are the means by which new state forms are created, new territories are formed, and new

definitions of citizenship are produced. The Yukon agreements do not describe what was—they create something new. While it is possible to cast that reality as colonial, it is equally possible to label it as reconciliatory. No matter how we choose to define and address our dilemmas, *Sovereignty's Entailments* makes it clear that big conversations remain for all of us.

References

Beckman v Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation, 2010 SCC 53, [2010] 3 SCR 103.

First Nation of Nacho Nyak Dun v Yukon, 2017 SCC 58, [2017] 2 SCR 576.

The Council for Yukon Indians, *Together Today for our Children Tomorrow: A Statement of Grievances and an Approach to Settlement by the Yukon Indian People* (1973).

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