

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples Transcripts Online

David A. Smith

In October 2007, the University of Saskatchewan Archives acquired an important collection of documents from the university's Native Law Centre—the complete set of transcriptions of hearings and round table discussions of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP). This collection was originally donated to the Native Law Centre by former Saskatchewan premier and RCAP commissioner Allan Blakeney. The transcriptions document invaluable oral interviews with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, as well as with experts on Aboriginal issues, that took place throughout Canada in 1992–1993. As of April 2009, almost all 84,000 pages of these transcripts have been digitized and placed online by the University of Saskatchewan Archives so that anyone with Internet access may consult them.

In August 1991, the Canadian government established the Royal Commission with a mandate to investigate relations among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, the Canadian government, and Canadian society as a whole. The Commission was advised to “examine all issues which it deems to be relevant to any or all of the aboriginal peoples of Canada.”¹ To fulfill that mandate, the Commission, made up of both Native and non-Native members, embarked on a series of public hearings across the country. In 1992 and 1993, its members visited ninety-six Canadian communities, more than any previous royal commission. It held 178 days of hearings and heard briefs from more than 2,000 people. As Commission co-chair and former national chief of the Assembly of First Nations Georges Erasmus noted, “The power of the messages unfiltered, forthright, confidently expressed in community surroundings was extraordinary.”²

The University of Saskatchewan Archives believes that this large online RCAP transcript collection will be of great interest to Canadians. Because of the Commission's massive scale, it may be the largest single collection of oral history transcripts ever recorded in this country. The Royal Commission transcripts of the hearings and roundtable discussions are of great potential value to scholars working in a wide range of disci-

1 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *Looking Forward, Looking Back*, vol. 1 (Ottawa: Canada Communication Group, 1996), 2.

2 Georges Erasmus quoted in *Address for the launch of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ap/pubs/spch/spch-eng.asp> <4 June 2009>.

plines, including Native Studies, history, political studies, law, anthropology, sociology, health sciences, environmental studies, and public policy. In fact, the material could be useful to anyone attempting to improve our understanding of specific historical and contemporary Aboriginal issues, and the overall Native experience in Canada. The transcripts will also likely be of interest to the families of the Aboriginal people who were interviewed. Soon after the online release of the transcript collection, University of Saskatchewan archivist Cheryl Avery received an email of thanks from a woman who had been interviewed by the Commission but never received a transcription of her testimony. The Archives expects that there will be as much interest in using these resources from families and communities as there will be from scholars.

In terms of content, numerous historical and contemporary issues were engaged in depth during these hearings. Topics examined include: relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, self-government, self-determination, identity, Inuit and Métis issues, the North, education, language, culture, urban issues, poverty, economy, justice, Aboriginal elders, youth and women, health, healing, treaty rights and obligations, lands, resources, the Indian Act, public policy, and the residential school experience. The Commission visited large cities, Indian reserves, Métis settlements, Inuit communities, schools, prisons, halfway houses, friendship centres, and women's shelters.

The first-hand testimony from respected elders and community leaders is an exceptionally valuable historical record. Aboriginal people were given an opportunity to speak directly to the Commission and present their views of history and of what the future could or should hold for them. Non-Aboriginal Canadians also presented their views of the past and on how their relationship with Aboriginal peoples should evolve. The diversity of Canadian history revealed through the compelling testimony of Aboriginal cultural and political leaders, community members, and non-Aboriginal leaders and citizens from across Canada cannot be overestimated. The direct narratives significantly add to our knowledge of Canadian culture, society, and history. As Brenda Macdougall of the University of Saskatchewan's Department of Native Studies notes, RCAP "was perhaps the most seminal, large scale research project of the 20th century for Aboriginal people."³ Professor of Geography and Canada Research Chair Evelyn Peters adds, "Given the concern that many Aboriginal people have about being researched again and again about the same topics,

3 E-mail from Brenda Macdougall to David A. Smith, 13 May 2008.

it makes sense to use the material that is [now] readily available.”⁴ The dramatic surge in enrollment in Native Studies courses and others related to Indigenous issues in universities across Canada has created a demand for materials about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. Scholars are also currently exploring how the original RCAP recommendations were developed. Making access to these transcripts is essential to this effort.

The digitized RCAP transcriptions have been made part of the University of Saskatchewan’s collaborative *Our Legacy* website, which was launched in 2008. *Our Legacy* is a searchable thematic guide containing digitized archival resources and materials relating to Aboriginal peoples held in archives and special collections in Saskatchewan. *Our Legacy* incorporates faceted searching—essentially, narrowing results based on the order of search terms used. To access the RCAP transcripts in an online search, go to the *Our Legacy* site at <http://scaa.sk.ca/ourlegacy>. On the left of the screen, select the institution, *University of Saskatchewan Archives*. From the lengthy results list, click on *Subject*, and then select the *Royal Commission* (2548 documents) from the drop down menu on the left. Click on *Subject* again to see a list of nineteen main subject headings for the RCAP transcripts. Clicking on one of the headings—for example, *Inuit Affairs* (263 documents)—and then on *Subject* once more will provide a list of more detailed subheadings. From there, clicking on the term *Women*, for example, provides users with a much more manageable list of 29 transcripts/excerpts from the RCAP transcripts on the subject of Inuit women. The documents range in length from a 3-page transcript excerpt to a 326-page complete transcript on this topic.

Another effective way to access the transcripts is by making use of the specific citations provided in the five-volume publication, *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, which was released in 1996. Enter the name of the person interviewed or the date of the interview in the *Our Legacy* search field to retrieve the desired transcript. The *Report* has been heavily consulted and can be found in almost any mid-sized or larger library in Canada. While the *Report* is based primarily on these hearings and discussions, only brief excerpts from the transcripts appear in its text. For example, Chief Dorothy McDonald of Fort McKay, Alberta is quoted in the report on the subject of the environment and health issues:

Fort McKay is [at] the epicentre of the tar sands development
.... The government tells us that there is no pollution. They

4 E-mail from Evelyn Peters to David A. Smith, 13 May 2008.

have done studies that say there is no pollution. But we say they are wrong, because we have seen the changes that have taken place in the environment. The pollution has not only damaged the environment, it has made the people of Fort McKay sick. For a small community of 300, we have high rates of cancer and other illnesses When we approach the government for funding to correct these problems, they tell us, you go see the next department, and then they give us the run-around. They tell us to set up a committee. So we set up a committee, and we sit around the table and talk and we talk and we talk, but that's as far as it gets.

Chief Dorothy McDonald

Fort McKay

Fort McMurray, Alberta, 16 June 1992⁵

These quotations, which are merged together, summarize seven pages of testimony. But for a researcher examining in any depth the question of how the tar sands development impacted Aboriginal communities, access to the whole transcript itself, which provides the real grist for Chief McDonald's arguments, would be necessary. The full transcript spans seven pages and reveals that since the 1960s, members of her band were not informed of what was happening regarding tar sands development and were left out of any decision-making. McDonald states that it has become impossible to live off their land, that the river in which they once swam and drank from was now full of pollutants, and that the moose and beaver populations had dramatically declined, which reduced the number of trap lines by half. Chief McDonald asserts that these tar sands megaprojects brought quick money to other Albertans, but only brought hardship and environmental degradation to her community. Dorothy McDonald talks about her band's ongoing efforts to have a health study conducted and how they need to be a part of decision-making about the land because they are the ones who have to live with the results. In short, there is a great deal more to these transcripts than could possibly have appeared in the published *Reports*.

When the Royal Commission was established in 1991, it was based on an underlying principle that all Canadians, regardless of their economic

⁵ Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *Gathering Strength*, vol. 3 (Canada Communication Group, 1996), 198.

situation, eloquence, or education, should have access to the products of the meetings. More than a decade has past since this testimony was gathered, and in the spirit of this vision of openness, inclusion, and access, the University of Saskatchewan Archives has now made the transcriptions freely available online for the benefit of as many Canadians as possible.