

REBOOTING HISTORY

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On 23 June 2015, *Winnipeg Free Press* columnist Dan Lett published an article titled “Are we up to the challenge of rebooting history?” He was reacting to a comment he heard on a TV program to the effect that wild-animal trapping began with the postcontact fur trade. He took issue with the intimation that trapping was unknown in precontact times. It bids fair to suggest that Mr Lett is correct in thinking that trapping was being practiced well before the arrival of Europeans. But of course his chosen subject is the very small tip of a very large iceberg.



Indigenous trapping: a long-standing tradition. Drawing by Jan Morier, courtesy of Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Tourism, Culture, Heritage, Sport and Consumer Protection.

The term “reboot” as used by Mr Lett means to “restart.” I think by that he means we have to re-visit and re-jig our approach to defining history, but I think the real issue is making use of information we already have, and Mr Lett touches rather obliquely on this notion. Most of his article speaks overwhelmingly to literate and not preliterate history, to which society seems to be paying precious little attention.

In his article, Mr Lett identifies a number of themes in addition to the aforementioned wild-animal trapping. He mentions the fur trade in general, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the origin story of the Canadian state, residential schools, cultural genocide, *terra nullius*, the Doctrine of Discovery, Christopher Columbus, Louis Riel, Métis people, Confederation, and serious injustices. All of these themes came to pass at some time or other within the last 400 years or so. But is this the full scope of Aboriginal history in Manitoba? Hardly, but due to comparatively recent developments (the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, missing and murdered Aboriginal women, the Sixties

Scoop in particular), *modern* history is understandably making news and that's probably what "Aboriginal history" means to most folks these days.

Archaeologists are of the opinion that Aboriginal people were living more or less continuously somewhere or other within (but not everywhere throughout) Manitoba for the past 11,000 years. They base this estimate on scientific facts and rational thinking. Four hundred years represent 3.6 % of 11,000 years. This means that during 96.4% of human history hereabouts there were no government-mandated residential schools, Sixties Scoops, nutritional experiments on Aboriginal people, culturecide, racism, infested blankets, heavily-regulated Indian reserves, etc, etc. There was/were no alcohol or drug-abuse, smallpox epidemics, prostitution, or 1,200 missing or murdered Aboriginal women and girls. There were no foreign missionaries bent on the destruction of the Native world view.

On the other hand, *pre-European* Indigenous history is one of repeated immigration and out-migration, culture-sharing, exploration, 4,000-year-old metallurgy (copper "blacksmithing"), short- and long-distance trade, agriculture, hunting and gathering of wild animals and plants, wild-ricing, indigenous spirituality, multi-general survival in the face of naturally-induced hardship and catastrophe, to name a few. All of this and more is documented in black-and-white, right now in our libraries and archives.

Mr Lett quotes Ry Moran, Director of the National Research Centre on Truth and Reconciliation, as saying, "Canada as we know it is just a blip in the overall history of what has happened in North America." Absolutely true, but it begs the question: how many of us are familiar with the details of all the rest of the 10,600-year-long history? The only part of the past that seems to seriously matter to anyone beyond the classroom these days is that which has been played out since the European arrival – 3.6 % of Manitoba's total Aboriginal history. Happily, the other 96.4 % is finding its way into modern-day school curricula and textbooks. Elsewhere, laypersons can be forgiven if they're left with the impression that "real" Aboriginal history somehow only began with European contact and the European custom of making and keeping written records.

Besides, with the myriad problems engendered by European contact, Euro-Canadian domination, and the cavalcade of injustices and crushing social problems that they spawned, who's got time for a period of history during which no such problems existed?!

Frankly, as an archaeologist I was encouraged to see Mr Lett raise the topic of the pre-European Aboriginal past, given that the overwhelming emphasis nowadays is on post-contact history and the chronic present-day social problems that have come about in the wake of it.