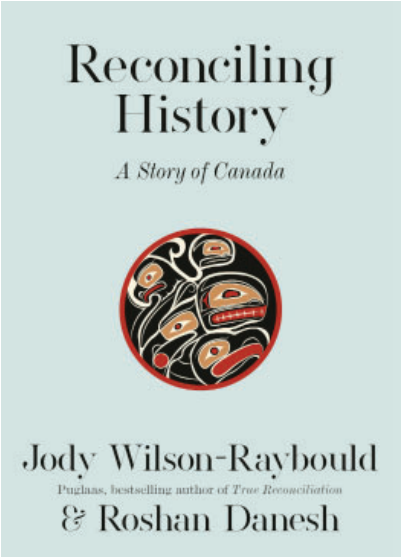

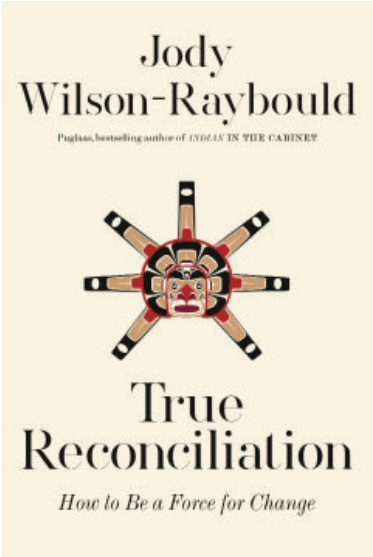

Book Reviews

Reconciling History: A Story of Canada by Jody Wilson-Raybould and Roshan Danesh, McClelland & Stewart, 2024, xii + 357 pages, including acknowledgements, notes, illustration credits, no index.

True Reconciliation: How to Be a Force for Change by Jody Wilson-Raybould (in collaboration with Roshan Danesh), McClelland & Stewart, 2022, xii + 340 pages, including acknowledgements, notes, no index.

PATRICIA L. VERGE

While international conflicts are fought between enemies on a very clear and simple proposition of win or lose, the choice here in Canada is one that must be made among friends and neighbours. We must face the underlying tensions. We must understand them and we must resolve them. Neither side believes that the other is going anywhere. This is home. So, how do we live side-by-side and build a future of prosperity together? We share space in a common land. We constitute a society that is envied by other countries. We are economically interdependent. We have many social ties. Our children are married to one another through which we share generations of grandchildren. So inextricably tied are we that our options are also very clear and simple: we can all win or we can all lose. (Elder Fred Kelly of the Ojibways of Onigaming, qtd. in *Reconciling History* 285–87)

The authors of *Reconciling History* and *True Reconciliation*, both lawyers,[1] have devoted their own lives to

1 In her distinguished career, Wilson-Raybould has served, among many leadership positions, as British Columbia regional chief of the Assembly of First Nations, and, from 2015 to 2019, as

the cause of reconciliation, healing and justice between Canada's Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. Both books give Canadian readers the foundations of knowledge—and, what is more, the motivation—to do the hard work required to move more quickly and resolutely to resolve, together, the many outstanding issues in the way of making Canada a place of material and spiritual prosperity for everyone. They also remind us that this is a generational process; there are no quick solutions or easy fixes.

While it is the newer of the two books, *Reconciling History* could almost be seen as the natural prequel to *True Reconciliation*. The former's rich exploration of the long and turbulent history of Canada provides a valuable background to the forward-looking prescription found in the latter. Thus, while *True Reconciliation* is a most richly rewarding read on its own, this review first considers *Reconciling History*.

The rationale behind *Reconciling History* is captured by the quote from Georges Erasmus, co-chair of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and former chief of the Assembly of First Nations, with which it opens: "Where common memory is lacking, where people do not share in the same past, there can be no real community. Where community is to be formed, common memory must be created" (ix).

Jody Wilson-Raybould and Roshan Danesh set out to help us create that common memory in this important book. They do not claim to tell the definitive story of Canada; rather they call it *a* story of Canada—an alternative to the one that most Canadians have received for generations. This is a compelling, poetic new telling of history, which includes both Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices (and features many illustrations) as the authors' narrative weaves together excerpts from official documents, speeches, legal decisions, and accounts of constant advocacy by Indigenous people over generations.

The book is structured by Wilson-Raybould's creative use of a totem pole from her home territory on Quadra Island, off the west coast of British Columbia. The Musgamagw Dzawada'enuxw Totem Pole at Gwa'yi or Kingcome, the home of Wilson-Raybould's grandmother Pugladee, has four crests: the First Ancestor, or Cedar Man; the Raven; the Wolf; and the Thunderbird. The book is structured into four parts according to the meaning of each crest: the Indigenous worldview of the relationship between humans and the natural world; early relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people where possibility and hope transformed into patterns of oppression and colonization; Indigenous resilience and advocacy; and finally, efforts to build transformed relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (12).

The totem pole, Wilson-Raybould writes, invites us to view history from

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Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada. Dr. Roshan Danesh is an internationally renowned lawyer and educator who for over two decades has been on the frontlines of advancing Indigenous rights and reconciliation in Canada.

different angles than we have been used to, "to see its dimensions, its curves, and its cuts. . . . To recognize, just as our carvers do, that the story of the past is always there to be retold, recast, and reconsidered, and to be conveyed to generations to come. To understand that in the act of retelling, meaning is found and strength is built" (9).

This generous sharing of culture and wisdom, despite historical injustices and the "exclusive and siloed" (10) accounts of the past we have been fed, moves the reader to believe we are entering a time when we *can* create a common history.

Wilson-Raybould and Danesh challenge us to look at the evidence for ourselves, to weigh it, question it, and do more digging. The book is rich with entries, each of which could be a subject of extensive research. One suspects much more could have been included; nonetheless, what has been included is unsettling enough.

For example, we can read a portion of the actual Royal Charter of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1670, in which the British King Charles II gave his own people a massive tract of land ("Rupert's Land") encompassing the entire Hudson Bay drainage system. This "granting" of Indigenous-owned land began a two-century-long monopoly over the fur trade by people who had come from elsewhere (53). This act of economic exclusion of the original inhabitants of this land was a prelude to their political exclusion at the inception of the country of Canada: the 1867 signing of Confederation was enacted exclusively by French- and English-speaking settlers. By placing these and myriad other events in their historical context, the authors compellingly argue that

> Canada was born in denial of the prior presence of Indigenous Peoples on these lands. . . . Whether we're talking about the Indian Act, the continued taking of lands and entrenchment of the reserve system, the forced relocation of whole families and communities, the denial of basic individual rights and freedoms, or the residential "school" system, one thing is glaringly clear: an effort was being made to create a Canada where Indigenous people did not exist and, indeed, had never existed. (69–71)

While the ongoing need for healing within communities that have been oppressed for so long is always in the background of the narrative, this is also a story of victory and success. We learn not only of the hundreds of court cases in which Indigenous people have successfully vindicated their rights, but also of the growing role of Indigenous people, particularly young leaders, in public life. We learn about Indigenous accomplishments in the arts, in music, in professions, in the transition from fossil fuels to green energy, in economic life.

And we learn that there is a part for everyone to play in creating a more just Canada. That is the "foundational message" of the Kingcome totem pole: "we

are one with each other" (305). "I think there will come a time when the non-Indigenous people in Canada will see a strong vibrant Aboriginal population as nothing to fear but rather something to support," says George Erasmus, who believes that with enough land and resources, Indigenous people can become self-sufficient, self-reliant and implement self-governance (308).

Reconciling History is a wonderful resource for all Canadians. It also provides direction for Bahá'í scholarship in subjects such as the notion of two-eyed seeing (viewing the world through both Western and Indigenous knowledge and worldviews); the link between Indigenous concepts of self-determination and the Bahá'í focus on every population building capacity to become a protagonist in its own development; and the renewal of Indigenous governance and its relationship to Bahá'í administrative practices and consultation.

True Reconciliation: How To Be a Force for Change was written by Wilson-Raybould in response to the question she is asked by Canadians more than any other: "What can I do to help advance reconciliation?"

Wilson-Raybould says that just asking the question is a good start; it reverses "[t]he more common experience [in which] Indigenous Peoples [have been] told things, treated like we needed to be saved from ourselves because we, and our ways of life, were inferior" (3).

Wilson-Raybould writes out of a belief that Canadians are at a critical, potentially transformative, moment in the life of their country: we urgently need to "learn how to live together into the future in ways that address the legacy of colonialism, uphold rights, and transform the status quo" (13). This is our shared work, and while progress often invites pushback, she rejects the attitude from any group that the work is too hard.

The book is divided into three parts—Learn, Understand, and Act.[2]

The "Learn" section provides a comprehensive historical overview. One central truth—that the Indian Act of 1876 and its subsequent versions made no reference to existing treaties or others being negotiated at the time—jumps out. The colonial, racist and paternalistic Act became the "principal constitutional mechanism" (96) used to interact with Indigenous peoples after Confederation, in defiance of the treaties that Indigenous peoples had negotiated in good faith as nations, as had been previously recognized in domestic law (96). Having never ceased to see themselves as self-determining and self-governing nations—as recognized today by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples—generations of Indigenous peoples have had to fight in the courts for their inherent rights. The sheer economic cost of constant litigation affects all Canadians.

2 Bahá'ís may see resonance here with their own framework for action, in which Action is informed by the understanding born of learning, through Consultation, Reflection, and Study.

In "Understand," Wilson-Raybould describes two interrelated but distinct tracks that are needed to achieve true reconciliation. The first track involves addressing material and social conditions—"the day-to-day states of poverty, marginalization, and crisis that many Indigenous Peoples and communities find themselves facing." The second involves finally and decisively recognizing Indigenous rights, including self-determination and self-government.

In "Act," reconciliation is described as "a marathon, not a sprint," because the depth of the change needed at all levels requires substance (270). Symbolic or "performative" acts of reconciliation (for example, taking down statutes of controversial public figures or lowering the flag) should not be the leading focus of the work. Action needs to lead to real change. and real change requires us to visualize new patterns of social, cultural, and economic relations as individuals, peoples, communities and governments.

As the late Justice Murray Sinclair, chief commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, often reminded us, "Truth is hard. Reconciliation is harder" (236). Wilson-Raybould agrees: "[I]t requires staying the course, even when it feels incredibly hard" (271). This work will long outlast any particular government. And the involvement of non-Indigenous people is crucial: "Yes, Indigenous Peoples need to do these things and play their roles. But those who have suffered from colonialism are not responsible for addressing it. We need to be clear that Canadian governments and all Canadians need to do the heavy lifting in addressing this terrible legacy" (278).

Wilson-Raybould, with assistance from Roshan Danesh, has done an effective job of presenting the case for active participation by all Canadians. The two collaborators have coined the term "in-betweeners" for people who commit to this work:

> Being an agent of true reconciliation means aspiring to build unity, cohesion, and harmony between peoples. It means viewing ourselves and our purpose as being a bridge between peoples and communities that have histories of injustice, silos and conflict. It means being "inbetween." (306)

Bahá'í scholars may be well placed to explore further the meaning of being an "in-betweener," and as time goes on we may hope that more and more Canadian Bahá'ís of all kinds will have stories of being effective "in-betweeners" to share. Further scholarship that encourages and guides young people to shape their careers to help advance change in both tracks described above would also be a welcome contribution.

It is hard to do justice in a short review to the scope of these two books and the wisdom, evidence, encouragement and hope in them. These exceptionally timely works are a gift to all Canadians hoping to make a contribution to building a better country.