

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Disinherited Generations: Our Struggle to Reclaim Treaty Rights for First Nations Women and Their Descendants. By Nellie Carlson and Kathleen Steinhauer, as told to Linda Goyette.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2sn5h34n>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 38(3)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Tigerman, Kathleen

**Publication Date**

2014-06-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

**Disinherited Generations: Our Struggle to Reclaim Treaty Rights for First Nations Women and Their Descendants.** By Nellie Carlson and Kathleen Steinhauer, as told to Linda Goyette. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press. 172 pages. \$24.95 paper.

This passionate story of two ardent Cree activists intent on securing treaty rights and gender equality for Aboriginal, indigenous, and Métis women and children unfolds through a strong third-person narrative that intersects with first-person accounts. Nellie Carlson and Kathleen Steinhauer relate to Linda Goyette, who is non-indigenous, their experiences of gender and racial discrimination by the Canadian government and their fight for justice for themselves and their descendants. Their interaction gives flesh and blood to an ongoing struggle.

Linda Goyette sets the scene by describing her decades-long involvement with the two Cree elders and their talking and listening sessions, which often took place at the kitchen table. Nellie and Kathleen, who are referred to throughout by their first names, were born into the Saddle Lake Cree Nation in Alberta, Canada. Both Cree women and their children, although of historic lineage, were disinherited by the government's interpretation of the Indian Act and patriarchal power structures in First Nation communities. In response, they and others helped create the Indian Rights for Indian Women movement, which after nearly fifty years helped reverse some of the worse injustices.

The Kafkaesque bureaucratic maneuvers by the Canadian government are bewildering, but Goyette's narrative overview, together with the "Timeline of Membership Rights and First Nations Women in Canada," and the "Glossary of Terms Related to the Identity of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada" that are provided in an appendix, help the reader make her way through the morass, with clear definitions of terms that refer to specific variations in how governmental agencies may treat an indigenous person—blue, red, and white "ticket holders."

The bureaucratic nightmare was created to deprive First Nations of their land and to disenfranchise First Nations people of treaty rights. Nellie and Kathleen's work originally involved trying to end Section 12(1)(b) of the Indian Act, the discriminatory code created under the British colonial system that deprived any Native woman and her children of treaty rights if she were to marry a non-status or Métis man. A non-status Indian is one who "is not registered as an Indian under the Indian Act" (151). Yet this restriction did not apply to any Indian man, even if he were to marry a white woman. She would gain Indian status, as would her children, while full-blooded Native women and their children would be forced off their reserve. The intention behind this byzantine rule was clearly stated by Duncan Scott, director of the Department

of Indian Affairs between 1913 and 1942, who said, “We will work to see to it that one day not one Indian is left” (58).

Scott instituted another policy that did incalculable damage to Native integrity when in 1920 his agency mandated that all Native children were to attend a residential school. Chapter 2, “Surviving Residential School,” tells of horrific abuse perpetrated on children aged seven to fifteen, and sometimes younger. Both Nellie and Kathleen describe severe physical, emotional, and cultural abuse that they themselves suffered, and write about the sexual abuse of other children. Many former students filed lawsuits against the Edmonton Indian Residential School for the abuse they suffered there. Rev. James Clarence Ludford “pleaded guilty to charges of gross indecency against a male student,” but was given a short suspended sentence and reassigned to another First Nations community (17).

Compounding governmental policy were many instances of First Nation communities that aided and abetted the Canadian government. The two Cree women show compassion and wisdom in understanding that some of their own male family members were compromised by their marriages to white women. Native communities feared the extra expense of providing housing and annuity payments for people who succeeded in regaining their treaty rights. Nellie and Kathleen acknowledge the silencing and terror created in Native communities by the threat of government agents arbitrarily removing Indians from band lists, but they are also clear that patriarchy and misogyny among their own people were underlying elements in their struggle.

Highlighting the collective nature of this decades-long struggle is a five-page annotated “honor roll” of colleagues, community supporters, and petitioners in national and international tribunals who shared the pain and hard work. While Nellie Carlson, Kathleen Steinhauer, and many other indigenous women were successful in changing some of the most oppressive conditions and restoring rights to thousands, the struggle for the rights of First Nation people goes forward as Idle No More continues their mobilization, empowered in part by Attawapiskat First Nation Chief Theresa Spence’s six-week-long fast. While the Canadian Parliament finally formally endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, its official policy statement was actually short of full support, and emphasized Canada’s many objections to those rights. Many First Nations leaders, however, are rightfully proud of the power of this symbolic and consequential bill and anticipate improved First Nations and Canadian interactions.

*Kathleen Tigerman*  
University of Wisconsin-Platteville