

# Treaty as bottomline: As love

Peter Haresnape

*If this litle World of o[u]r Boddies Were all Armes, or all Leggs it Would proue very vnfitt for vse, and the same I doe conclude to betyde in this bigger World I meane this ffenny Region.<sup>1</sup>*

In 1922 T.S. Eliot published *The Waste Land*, a long poem filled with allusions, quotations, and strange images. The poem opens with a vision of dry desert(ed) ruins, death and sterility, and concludes in an ambiguous collision of poetic fragments drawn from past literature, Eastern and Western religions, erudite plays, and popular songs. The overall effect is a confusing and unresolved commentary on modern life in the shadow of the First World War. The final lines of the poem circle a key phrase: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins.” In a time of disintegration, chaos, and loss of moral centre, the poet and the reader pull together whatever fragments of meaning, beauty, whimsy, and truth that they can. The efficacy of this effort is left to the recipient of the poem to judge.

The “dry ruins” that I write from include the retrenchment of colonisation,<sup>2</sup> social collapse as a result of climate change, the absurd, pernicious grounding of Christofacism, and the failure of religious institutions to restrain evil. Around 2003 I read an article that listed “trying to understand *The Waste Land*” as one of the fifty essential activities for a University of Stirling undergraduate, a prompt that I took seriously. I carried my battered copy of *Selected Poems* through my degree programme and with me in the years that followed—to protest camps in Scotland and England against nuclear weapons and coal power, to occupied Palestine to learn from Palestinian and Israeli peace activists and educators, and then to Turtle Island.

In these days I live and work in the lands of the Haudenosaunee, Wyandot, and Mississauga (Anishinabe) Nations, in the watershed of Lake Ontario, in the city of Toronto. I am a long way away from the East of England where I was born, and from the churches (nondenominational and evangelical) of my upbringing. I have been married to Ken for nearly ten

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1 Quotation from an unattributed letter, 1622, objecting to the drainage of the Fens and the anticipated loss of biodiversity and imposition of monoculture. Quoted from Todd A. Borlik and Clare Egan, “Angling for the ‘Powte,’” *English Literary Renaissance* 48, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 256–289.

2 I have asked the editors to retain the spelling of words according to the English that I grew up with: colonise, favourite, dyke, etc.

years, and we live with our three feuding guinea pigs in a Mennonite-founded intergenerational community. I am Peter (he/him).

For six years I've served Toronto United Mennonite Church (TUMC) as a pastor, after being a member for some years. I first encountered Mennonites as a young adult through Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT<sup>3</sup>), an organisation that supports communities taking nonviolent peacemaking action in response to violence or oppression. Through CPT I came to Turtle Island as a volunteer, supporting Indigenous-led movements to defend land and water, and this brought me into contact with Mennonites, although it was not a foregone conclusion that I would join the church.

I was new to both Mennonite and Indigenous worlds, and in both cases was connected to smaller, politically active subgroups. Although an outsider to both groups, I could immediately see myself as a member of the Mennonite communities, and could be claimed as such in a way that would never be possible among the particular Indigenous Nations that invited our team into relationship. This latter invitation was to witness, show up, and be supportive without becoming a part of the story. My goal was to ensure Indigenous people taking direct action against the harms of settler colonialism were able to do so without being harassed or intimidated, and to avoid (as far as possible) situations where my teammates and I could be misrepresented as the “heroes.”

By contrast, it was possible for me to find a home within a Mennonite community—perhaps even necessary, so that I could have a community to be accountable to. The church I ended up attending (TUMC) gave me a place to explore my vocation, and invited me after a few years to membership—and eventually, pastoral office. As a white European Christian with a commitment to pacifism, I suspect it was a lot easier for me to join a Mennonite community than it had been for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) Mennonites. TUMC is a socially progressive urban Mennonite congregation that had put effort into welcoming queer folks and honouring different ethnicities. Inevitably, though, I left behind certain theologies, spiritual practices, vocabulary, and songs in order to become a member. Both the Christianity of my upbringing and that which I have claimed/have claimed me have been “fragments I shore against my ruins.”

Through solidarity work I have heard Indigenous teachers address many settler audiences, offering context and insight. As a volunteer facilitator of the KAIROS Blanket Exercise I learned almost by rote some of the basic facts of colonisation and resistance, including stories originally drawn from Indigenous Peoples' testimony to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1991–96). I've sat in formal teach-ins at university campuses and listened to storytelling around blockade-site fires, and I've read some of

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3 Since 2023 called “Community Peacemaker Teams.”

the generous canon of materials written in recent (and not-so-recent) years. These fragments I have shored against my ruins.

I make a practice of remembering how little I know; but how privileged my access has been. My learning has benefited from the so-called comprehensive education I received in the UK—one distant unit on Native Americans from secondary school, probably filled with the same simplicities as North American schools of the era, but mostly silence, especially about Canada. I'm sorry to say that I didn't think or know anything about Canada throughout my whole childhood, and the simple thought that there must be Indigenous people in Canada just as there are in the USA did not occur to me. This silence and ignorance at least allowed me to hear the stories of colonisation and resistance without having to dismantle a narrative of settler superiority or family heritage, and as an outsider with less to lose (or defend) it was easier for me to learn a truer story. At university I learnt language to understand colonialism through reading African and Caribbean literatures and gaining insights from other colonised contexts. These fragments I have shored against my ruins.

I'm no longer a full-time volunteer in the world of Indigenous-settler solidarity activism, but I am still invited to speak, consult, and write, especially for churches. I weigh the opportunity to lift up Indigenous voices involved in active struggle against the responsibility to share what I know and offer my understanding, doing some of the “heavy lifting” that might otherwise fall on Indigenous Peoples or go undone. I think there are things that can only be learned around the campfire—but perhaps I can offer words that disarm colonialism and strengthen those who resist.

While being humble about what I know and honouring those who taught me, I also don't want to obscure who I am—not just a generic Englishman/coloniser, I came from the Fens of East Anglia. I grew up in lands rich in agriculture, with echoes of Roman and Norman occupation in the landmarks, architecture, language, and legal system. I was born in the city of Ely, once “the Isle of Eels.” Ely Cathedral is poetically named “the ship of the Fens” because it once loomed over watery lands. But Ely is no longer an island, and the Fens have been drained. Eels are no longer caught in Ely.

In the 1630s, a group of rich men known as “adventurers” employed engineers and surveyors to drain the Fens. Over the following centuries the water was drained away through specially cut channels called dykes, pumped at first by wind, then coal, then diesel engines. The most famous engineer was a Dutch man named Cornelius Vermuyden, whose name graces schools and whose descendants can be traced throughout the area. Their drainage efforts changed the land into highly productive farmland, requiring constant maintenance.

The drained soil of the Fens is peat: a fertile, dark soil. But without the water, the peat shrinks, lowering the land even further below sea level and

emitting carbon in the process. Strong winds blowing over flat land with minimal trees and wide-open fields create a “fen blow”—a barrage of displaced soil to batter your house and car and further deplete the land. The drainage has completely changed the species of animal, bird, and insect life, except in marginal places and a few areas where the Fen ecology is maintained.

The artificial landscape has a stark look. The skies are large, the fields are flat, and there are few trees. As a small child I read books about children in enchanted forests without understanding that forests were real. Driving anywhere in the Fens means navigating bumpy, subsiding road surfaces and multiple bridges across drainage dykes, but it’s rare that we interact with the water itself. Unlike natural rivers, the dykes are uniformly straight and deep with steep banks, not good for swimming or recreation.

Each winter, large areas of land called “washes” are intentionally flooded, recreating huge shallow fields of water, which are pastures in drier seasons. On occasion, winter stays cold enough for long enough to form ice strong enough for skaters. Fen skating is the oldest tradition of skating in the country, predating artificial rinks, and it is charmingly eccentric. There are formal championship races and games with trophies awarded, but only every few years when the weather is right, and the competitors are whoever can get time off work or school and get down to the Fens. It is increasingly rare for the weather conditions to permit this practice.

Fen religion has its own rare, stark character. At one time the Fens were called the Holy Land of the English, in part because of the great cathedrals and abbeys. The inundated lands were unproductive for farming, and inhabitants either clustered in small hamlets on drier ground or lived under cathedral spires in the market towns. The damp and the diet produced sickness, and the Fens were thought of as desolate, wild, and demon-haunted. In order to contend with unclean spirits, it is said, holy people were drawn to live in the Fens.

Queen Etheldreda founded the great abbey at Ely after an eventful life. One of my favourite of the Anglo-Saxon saints, she pledged herself to prayer and virginity rather than a political marriage. She was nonetheless married off, but continued to exercise her holy autonomy over her body and soul by running away. With her handmaidens she took shelter on a rock in the ocean. Her erstwhile suitor pursued her and waited on the shore for the tide to go out. After three days of the women’s prayers he gave up and went home, after which God released the tides and the women were able to pursue their vocations unharassed.

Oliver Cromwell is another of the great religious figures of the Fens. He was an MP, a rebel, a military leader, a ruler, and a Puritan zealot. His bloody legacy lives on in the colonisation of Ireland. Ely Cathedral houses statues without heads because of the activities of his ilk. Every small country

church in England has a story that Cromwell's New Model Army used it as a stable during the Civil War.<sup>4</sup> I have seen his statue on the wall of reformers in Geneva. His house in Ely is a tourist attraction.

Hereward the Wake was a Saxon partisan who resisted the Norman conquest, fortifying Ely against them for many years. Finally his army was betrayed by the monks of Ely, who gave the Normans the secret safe path through the Fens—perhaps tired of living in a fortress? In the ensuing years the Normans built the great cathedral, stamping their authority for all to see in sacred stonework.

Queen Boudica was another notorious rebel, raising the Celts against their Roman occupiers, burning Roman colonies, and dying after her army was defeated, possibly by her own choice. Her brand really took off in the Victorian era as a symbol of British pride alongside imperial pretensions. In the strategy game *Civilization VI*, her Great General ability allows you to recruit barbarian troops to your side.

It seems that the Fens have stories of rebellion and struggle regardless of the era. The people of the Fens knew that the drainage meant the end of their livelihood. For generations they sabotaged the pumping stations and earthworks, burnt houses and crops, and broke sluice gates. Their struggle reached beyond the material, since this was a spiritual threat as well. They would take water and pour it over the drying lands, seeking to placate Tiddy Mun, the spirit who had formerly protected their villages from flooding but who now sent sickness to punish the theft of his waters. Protest songs of the era invoke Neptune and Aeolus, honouring *noms de guerre* like Captain Flood. These ballads speak in the voice of species facing extinction, calling for inter-species alliance against the colonisers, describing waters being incarcerated and criminalised.

The Fen folk were ridiculed, described as being pagan throwbacks with webbed feet, but they were also feared as “Fen Tigers” and punished as witches. I knew a little bit of this history as a child, but I only understood the drainage of the Fens as an amazing feat of engineering that had created arable land. It wasn't until I came to Turtle Island and learned from Indigenous land defenders that I could see that I had grown up in colonised, settled, devastated lands. The same people making money on colonising and enslaving around the world were doing the same a day's ride from London.

As a child I found the Fen museums deadly dull, not being interested in bone skates and stilts, wickerwork eel traps and low-bottom punts for fowling on shallow waters. But from Turtle Island I can perceive the genius of these technologies for thriving in the Fens. When the Fens were drained,

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4 “Very sensible,” comments my mother, noting that if your theology denies inherent sacredness in church buildings, you might as well use them to keep your horses safe on campaign.

this culture and its technology was recast as primitive. Agriculture displaced, and the wild Fen folk became farm workers or moved to the landless cities. The eel traps were sent to the museums and the punts became pleasure craft for Cambridge undergraduates. The Fens, I came to realise, are a place where something like an Indigenous culture was destroyed through the destruction of the land. I learned this by listening to land defenders explain about how their culture, law, and language are formed and passed on through relating to the land: trapping, hunting, fishing, gathering medicines. As the land is destroyed by clearcut logging, uranium mining, or subdevelopment construction, the culture is attacked. And as traditional activities are outlawed or made prohibitively expensive, the culture is attacked.

Although I am from England and my parents and their families are English, I grew up as a settler in the Fens. My parents migrated there from the northern industrial cities of their birth and built a life and family. In my lifetime I became a settler again by migrating to the lands of the Wyandot, Mississaugas, and Haudenosaunee, choosing to become a Mennonite, and a Canadian.

What I bring to the decolonisation work of my new home in occupied and colonised lands on Turtle Island is the knowledge of the endgame of colonisation. I know settler-colonialism tries to justify its activities with stories of progress and innovation. I know how settlers can feel love and loyalty to the landscape of their birth, knowing that the land itself is held together by constant tension, a battle against waters that want to return. I know that settlers believe in their deepest fears that if the settler state is abolished, they will be swept away by a tide of living justice. I know that this fear inspires hatred of Indigenous Peoples and dismissal of their rights. I know that this catastrophic fear or fantasy of annihilation is not the only possible form of decolonisation. I know that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18) and that many waters cannot overcome love (Song of Songs 8:10). These fragments I have shored against my ruins.

The difference for me between these two colonial contexts is treaty. Even though I have no prior family history in Canada, I can find a place for myself through the institution of treaty. Not exactly a “songline” or “landline,”<sup>5</sup> I think of treaty as a “bottomline” in the sense of “the basic, most important facts to be understood” and “something necessary that a person has taken responsibility for.” My sense of treaty, which has developed out of fragments gathered, is something like “love,” meaning a regard for the other, a desire for their well-being, and an intention not to overwhelm, absorb, or control.

The formal documents negotiated and signed between Indigenous and settler nations are called treaties, but I mean something more. Analysing the

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5 Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization* (Cascade Books, 2021).

flaws and injustices of these specific documents is important, but not my current intention. The concept and culture of treaty is more important than the letter of the law. Part of the beauty and tragedy of treaty is that it combines both settler and Indigenous traditions of making agreements about living together. The settler-colonial interpretation of specific treaties has assumed that they are land-surrender or sale documents, but the Supreme Court of Canada has consistently interpreted treaties through Indigenous perspectives as Protocols of perpetual sharing that (like covenants of scripture) reference the more-than-human world as a treaty witness or partner.

There is no treaty in the Fens, although there are unspoken understandings about the seasonal inundation and a grudging respect for the land, and thankfulness for its tortured fertility. The draining of the Fens was a land grab, the theft of the commons from the people, in line with the colonial doctrines of discovery and *terra nullius* in other lands. In Canada, treaty is almost nearly as nonexistent, but not quite. The enduring presence of Indigenous Nations and their constant work of advocacy, activism, and survival ensures that a vision of treaty continues to haunt the settler. This might be called a spiritual understanding of treaty, or “Treaty as Sacred Covenant,”<sup>6</sup> or treaty as love—a lover that assures, and demands, and welcomes, and transforms.

As a newly arrived settler, I am just as beholden to treaty as people whose ancestors have been settlers for centuries, or those whose ancestors were trafficked from other parts of the world, those without status, those whose legacies draw from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds, and those whose ancestries have been obscured by violence, adoption, and asylum. Treaty discussions often focus on how the Indigenous and settler nations are equals, but the treaty also offers an “equality before the law” to all non-Indigenous treaty participants.

While a land surrender is a document that terminates rights, a treaty creates and ensures an ongoing relationship between partners. It assumes that there will come a time to reevaluate and remember the initial common cause. In eastern Turtle Island, the symbol of the silver covenant chain was shared with the Dutch by the Haudenosaunee. The makers knew that the silver would tarnish, so that the parties would need to come together regularly and polish the chain, remembering their commitments. This understanding of treaty assumes that both parties hope for the continued existence and well-being of the other. At the very least, the parties are committing to support the flourishing of the other by fulfilling their side of the treaty, and they trust that their treaty partners understood and communicated their intentions.

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6 The name of a webinar series hosted by the Truth and Reconciliation working group of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada: [mcec.ca/treatysacredcovenantvideos](http://mcec.ca/treatysacredcovenantvideos).

I cannot say how a treaty-as-love decolonisation might affect those who live and bring life into the Fens, but I strongly suspect that it would not involve a zero-sum or catastrophic destruction of the settler imagination. There are ways to coexist, adapt, remember, and renew relationships. In some areas, the Fens are returning as a managed ecological preserve. In others, new crops like rice are being considered.<sup>7</sup> Canada Geese who have made the long Atlantic crossing join thousands of birds who flock to the wonderment of onlookers at the Welney Wetland Centre—a symbol for me of our interconnected world, my own migration, and the capacity for life to flourish even in colonised lands.

The more I try to use the language of landline, bloodline, and songline to explain what animates my imagination for holy decolonisation and righteous liberation, the more I realise that I am rooted in a ruin, grasping at fragments. These fragments nonetheless help me to understand that my singular life can participate in liberation on Turtle Island, where I have found myself. The spirit and intent of the treaties provide a solid bottomline to measure my own priorities against, in place of the landlines, bloodlines, and songlines of others. I don't expect to own land; my family line ends with me; and I have left behind the culture I knew in order to be part of a Mennonite faith community that can nurture and teach me. Yet treaty offers me a path to know who I am and how to relate in a land where I don't have roots. It is a generous and gracious discipleship.

*The beautiful order of nature (as some authors describe it) is the arrangement of rivers, meres, plains, etc., in such a way that everything helps everything else, each in their own way. This order is at risk of being destroyed by those who are attempting to drain the land, who claim that mono-culture pastureland is more profitable for the common good and for the benefit of private landowners. If this little world of our bodies were all arms, or all legs, it would prove very unfit for use, and the same principle holds in this bigger world—as in this Fen region.<sup>8</sup>*

## About the author

Peter Haresnape (he/him) was baptised in the city of Ely in the watershed of the Great Ouse by Ely Christian Fellowship (now Lighthouse Ely). He came across writings by Leo Tolstoy in Stirling University library, which led him toward pacifist and anarchist expressions of Christian faith, and eventually toward service on Turtle Island. He is one of the pastors of Toronto United Mennonite Church.

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7 Georgina Rannard, “Dismissed as a joke, UK’s first rice crop ripe for picking after hot summer,” *BBC*, 27 Sept. 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1wgeq702dyo>.

8 Unattributed letter, 1622, loose translation by me.