

Reader's Corner

Trevor Herriot, Towards a Prairie Atonement, (Regina:

University of Regina Press, 2017)

Reviewed by Joanna Skrajny

Trevor Herriot is a well-regarded and renowned prairie naturalist who has worked to try and protect Canada's dwindling natural prairie landscape. One of the most important tools in protecting this endangered landscape has been the community pasture program. This program established a system of grazing commons after the Dust-Bowl era in order to return cropland to grass and to preserve remaining stretches of prairie. Through this initiative wildlife received a much needed network of refugia. This federal protection was removed by the Conservative government in 2012. As Herriot pushed to restore this protection, he learned of the disturbing discrimination Indigenous peoples suffered from as these lands were established.

Towards a prairie atonement explores the tragic losses that Indigenous peoples suffered and the rapid loss of Canada's native grasslands. It begins with a brief timeline of the last 200 years on the prairie but, unlike the books I read in school, this timeline is from a Métis perspective. It shocked me to read through the events and realize just how profound my lack of knowledge was. My understanding of our prairie history was absurdly one-sided. Herriot's observation was all-too-true: "Colonialism, we have learned too late, is an utterly unreliable narrator."

Herriot's narrative tells the story of when the Métis of Ste. Madeline were forcibly removed from their community, their homes burned down. The land they had held and cared for together had been requisitioned by the federal government for the purpose of creating a community pasture.

The ending of the community pasture program in 2012, offers an opportunity to

set right this historical wrong. In order to move towards a prairie atonement, we need to make amends with both indigenous peoples and the landscapes that sustained them. Indigenous peoples, as a comment on Herriot's blog underlines, could once again play a part in taking care of and protecting our native grasslands.

Much more than a historical narrative, this small book is packed with important thoughts and moments that make you pause and think. It is a raw introspective on how we all have a part to play towards meaningful reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. This book is a must read for those

who want to gain a deeper understanding of Canada's prairie landscapes. The thought below, the first line in this book, captures well the collaborative spirit we must cultivate in order to preserve what matters.

Whether we are indigenous or newcomer, today our tipis are held down by the same peg. Neither is going anywhere. The knowledge and the will needed to protect and save these places no longer belongs to one people or tradition – Cynthia Chambers and Narcisse Blood, 'Love Thy Neighbour: Repatriating Precarious Blackfoot Sites'

