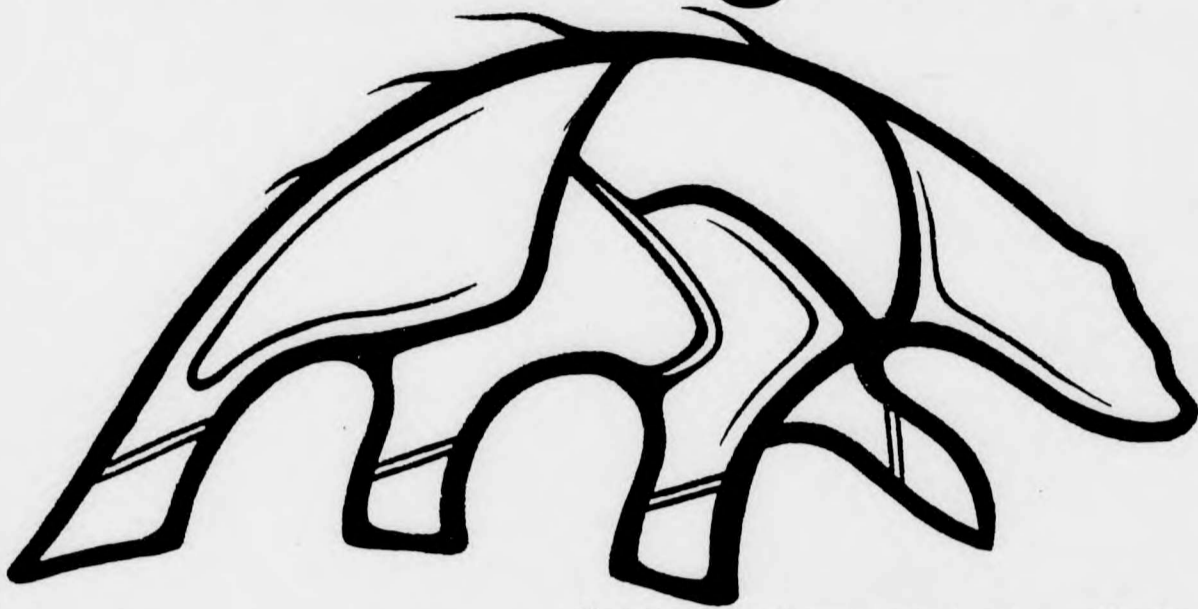


# Native Indians at York: reclaiming their heritage



The Native Resource Centre's graphic bear. Artist is Al Linklater.

by Stephen Mitchell

This is a preface. A preface is a dull, stuffy academic thing. I hate prefaces. But I could think of no other way to start off an article that would be — without this preface — absolutely cluttered with my own self-indulgent musings.

I'm a fifth-generation Canadian; my Scottish ancestors played a part in wresting this country away from its rightful owners. I have heard my elderly relatives refer to Canada as 'their' country, the fruit of 'their' hard work. And I have spent time on reserves in northern British Columbia, leaping about in lively friendship drum dances, and talking about spirit trails with young native students. Me and white liberal guilt — we go way back. But good journalism requires much more than white liberal guilt.

In order to write this story, I needed an approach, an angle, to legitimize my nosing around into other people's lives. I could have made this article issue-specific for, without a doubt, this has been a highly charged decade as far as aboriginal politics is concerned. I could have tugged and pushed and channelled my interviewees into saying all sorts of provocative, sensational things, like big-time journalists are supposed to. But that's not the way of real-life conversation, is it? Real-life conversation chooses its own thematic course, goes whichever way it wants, for as long as it wants.

I conducted the interviews for this story on a very simple principle: let the person on the other side of the coffee talk about whatever they're thinking about. I usually started off the discussions by asking the interviewees if they felt a sense of unity or community with other native students at York. But not always; sometimes the lead-off topic was hockey. Other times it was doughnuts, theatre or computers . . .

Lorrilee McGregor is in her element in a room full of computers.

But she hasn't always felt that way. McGregor was born and raised at the Birch Island Reserve on Manitoulin Island, just one of 10 children in a house on a meadow on the shores of a bay bearing her family name. She and her brothers and sisters grew up on the fringes of woodland, skipping stones over water "so clean that you could swim in it and drink it, without having to spit it out."

Today, McGregor lives in Toronto and coordinates York's Native Computer Communications Network (NCCN). Working out of a second-floor room in the Lumbers Building, McGregor monitors a system that links native groups and individuals from all over Canada for the purpose of information exchange and the promotion of self-government, economic development and cultural integrity.

It has been almost a year since she was hired. In that time, she says, her youthful shyness has gradually diminished as her exposure to new people has increased. Although her colleagues now describe her as "calm and cool" in her oral presenta-

tions at NCCN meetings, she admits that public speaking still terrifies her.

Deborah McGregor is a graduate environmental studies student and Yeowomen hockey player who works Wednesdays at the Native Resource Centre just across the hallway from the computer room where her sister works. After graduation, Deborah hopes to find her niche as an environmental consultant, working with people affected by any kind of large-scale developmental projects.

I talked with the McGregor sisters at the NCCN office on a recent Wednesday. Deborah slipped in and out of the interview, answering phone calls, greeting visitors and then finally disappearing altogether to make another appointment. Lorrilee climbed up on a table next to a map on the wall, pointing out for me the location of a remote northern Ontario reserve we'd been talking about. The conversation was loose, anecdotal and comfortable, and when Lorrilee finally produced a stack of photos from home I knew I was okay in her books.



The McGregors at Dreamer's Rock on Manitoulin Island. From left to right: Lesley, Darryl, Deborah and Lorrilee McGregor. Family friend Melody in centre of photo.

One of the topics raised in the conversation revolved around the issue of native self-determination versus cultural assimilation. Deborah felt that native communities' efforts towards self-determination were generally underestimated outside of the reserves. Gradually — and despite the governmental crew-cutting of funds — native peoples are taking control of their own political and economic destinies, she said. Deborah also emphasized that this process was one of adoption, rather than assimilation. Native peoples, she added, are not afraid of losing their identity just because they have adopted a different lifestyle. "Having a co-op on the reserve doesn't suddenly make us less Indian," she explained.

Lorrilee had a similar perspective on the matter. "If people know who they are, there's no problem," she said. "I'm the same person I was when I left the reserve."

We began to talk about the phenomenon of a certain liberal prototype, that of the non-native activist who advocates for native people a complete and immediate return to ancestral values and traditions, as if European contact had never happened. I suggested that the above prototype was simply taking good intention too far. "They're try-

ing to romanticize the bush life," Deborah winced. "But [living a traditional bush life] is hard, really hard." For instance, as a youngster on Manitoulin Island, Deborah was taught how to trap with wire snares. Wire snares have been a basic implement of 20th century native hunting life, but even these were unavailable before European contact.

Lorrilee reached into her files and came up with a transcribed quotation that refutes another common misconception of native people: that they all think alike.

These are the words of native writer R. Carlos Nakai: "We need to realize that we don't think homogeneously either. In the culture we think as individual people, we compare notes. That is how the philosophy of a tribe comes together. The philosophy from a band or a family is from individuals thinking together, comparing notes with each other. The onslaught now, with the New Age idea of Indians, is that all Native people are supposed to think one way about one thing or another, that all things are one homogeneous realm, but they are not. We don't work that way . . ." (from "Living in Two Worlds" published in *The Northeast Indian Quarterly*, fall, 1989).

The conversation ambled into the topic of the native community at York. Lorrilee wondered if the "fragmented" nature of the native student body stemmed from an uncertain feeling of self-identification among certain persons. Some people, she mused, might be "ashamed to admit that they're Indian."

"But not me," Lorrilee said. "I'm proud of it."

With the news of his wife Lorraine's acceptance to York two years ago, Kenn Pitawanakwat decided to leave his home (the Wikwemikong Reserve on Manitoulin Island) and find himself a line of study, too.

"Being a native person," he explained, "I always wanted to know the origins of Christianity, and why it did what it did to our native people. So I went to ground zero — the very beginnings of Christianity — to find out what it was made of." Pitawanakwat enrolled in religious studies. Two years later, he's finishing a specialized honours degree and has established himself as a "native traditions resource person," doing workshops (concerning, for example, the sweetgrass purification rite) with non-native business professionals and school boards. Pitawanakwat has also had a hand in setting up the NCCN. He lives on campus with his wife and his two daughters, whose English names are Angie and Teresa.

Pitawanakwat has been a devoted practitioner of native ritual for 18 years. "I'm saturated with tradition," he said, "regardless of where I am — in a boardroom downtown or off in the bush."

Osgoode student Bernd Christmas, a Micmac from the Membertou Reserve on Cape Breton Island, seems to share Pitawanakwat's ability to thrive on two very different planes of existence. When the president of the York First Nations Student Union graduates from Osgoode, he will have literally absorbed the cold, complex ins-and-outs of Canadian law. On the other hand, he will be able to invoke a rich, equally intricate code of native spirituality — an inherited knowledge that could barely be summarized (never mind retold) in any other language than Micmac.

Christmas' home reserve, a community of approximately 500 people, sits in a region that has smarted from recent major cutbacks in native funding and Indian Affairs services. There is a single Indian Affairs office in the Atlantic region, but it operates with consistently low native participation. Christmas, as concerned as he is about the agency that monitors his home band, has no plans to snag himself a high-paying governmental job after graduation. At the time of our conversation, he spoke of one day setting up an independent law firm specializing in native affairs.

Christmas approached the topic of self-determination with some hesitation. "It's a hard thing to define. Self-determination starts with a

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