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A Note about In The Rapids

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[Review of *In the Rapids*, by O. Mercredi and M.E. Turpel, (Toronto: Viking, 1993).]

*In The Rapids*¹ presents the views of the authors regarding First Nations people in Canada and the issues confronting them as individuals, within their nations, and within their communities. Mary Ellen Turpel and Ovide Mercredi are both First Nations Individuals. They share their own points of view and provide information with respect to these issues in their book. Throughout the book the authors share information by canvassing issues like the significance of Treaties to First Nations people; the provisions of the Indian Act and its effects on First Nations people; disputes over lands and resources; the social consequences of the larger Canadian society's systemic denigration of First Nations' cultures and languages; and socio-economic marginalization of First Nations people and their communities.

The authors are possibly the two most able First Nations people in Canada to share personal view points regarding issues of concern to Aboriginal and/or First Nations people. Ovide Mercredi has just completed a three year term as the Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations. This is the national representative organization of Treaty Status Indians in Canada. He has provided highly skilled leadership for First Nations people during a very difficult time period. Under his leadership, the Federal government and provincial governments had actually agreed to the entrenchment of the inherent right to self-government. Unfortunately, this initiative was defeated by the Referendum vote of October 1992. The book reviews the constitutional discussion process. Both authors consider the discussion to be a prerequisite for First Nations communities to begin healing and to move towards full and equal participation in Canadian society.

Mary Ellen Turpel is a leading academic with a First Nations' law specialty. She was the primary legal advisor to Ovide Mercredi and the Assembly of First Nations during the most recent Constitutional reform discussions and forums. She outlines the history and framework of each subject considered in the book. She lays the foundation for Ovide

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1. M. E. Turpel and O. Mercredi, *In the Rapids: Navigating the Future of First Nations* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1993).

Mercredi's discussion of the political and policy positions advocated by the Assembly of First Nations. Mercredi also provides his personal viewpoints and philosophy. This is most evident when he speaks of his philosophy of non-violence in dealing with issues related to the rights of First Nations. He notes the impact of Ghandi and his philosophy of non-violence in dealing with the British Colonial government. He describes how Ghandi influenced his views regarding the use of violence to resolve human rights issues. Too often when the Federal and provincial governments have not addressed issues concerning First Nations people, leaders have delivered dire warnings of violence and the use of armed force to resolve their concerns.

The authors' primary objective is one of sharing information in language that can be easily understood by the average Canadian seeking information regarding Aboriginal or First Nations people. It succeeds in achieving this goal. The classic question asked by many Canadians is "What is it that First Nations want?" *In the Rapids* provides the answer from two carefully considered perspectives which reflect the viewpoint of the majority of First Nations people in Canada today.

It is noteworthy that Ms. Turpel mentions in her introduction that she is deliberately breaking with the oral traditions of the majority of First Nations which entails little documentation of speeches given by First Nations' leaders. This is a critical step as too often, especially in the field of education, it is difficult to locate reference texts dealing with First Nations issues from a First Nations viewpoint.

A book which comes to mind in reading *In the Rapids* is Harold Cardinal's *Unjust Society*.² Cardinal spent many years as a First Nations rights activist and has recently returned to school to attain a law degree. Cardinal's book was written in 1969 just after the filing of the (then) Minister of Indian Affairs Jean Chretien's federal *White Paper*³ of 1969 which advocated the assimilation and destruction of all "special" (Aboriginal) rights for Aboriginal and/or First Nations people.

While lambasting the *White Paper*, Cardinal documented the ills, perils and issues confronting First Nations communities. Two and half decades later, we have two First Nations activists documenting similar issues. The issues generally remain unresolved. Cardinal advocated more control by First Nations communities. He argued for the abolishment of the Department of Indian Affairs. The same recommendations appear in

2. H. Cardinal, *The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada's Indians* (Edmonton: M.G. Hurtig Ltd., 1969).

3. Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy (Ottawa: Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1969).

In the Rapids. Cardinal's recommendation that there be "more control" by First Nations communities is translated by Mercredi and Turpel into the call for the federal government to acknowledge the "inherent right" to self-government.

Another of Cardinal's recommendations was the formation of a representative national organization for Treaty or status Indians. The National Indian Brotherhood came into existence and later evolved into the present day Assembly of First Nations following this suggestion. The organization has represented the Treaty/Status First Nations people. It has been involved in virtually every aspect of First Nations peoples' lives through its leaders. The development of the Assembly of first Nations has given Mr. Mercredi and Ms. Turpel the opportunity to be leaders and to be able to write such a book as *In The Rapids*.

Cardinal made comments in the *Unjust Society* regarding the type of leaders needed for the future. He stated that there is a need for new leaders "that will know and be able to relate positively to the traditions of the past, to the culture of our people and at the same time be tuned into life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries."⁴ This type of leader is personified in individuals like Ovide Mercredi and Mary Ellen Turpel. Each has proven to be effective in their field of expertise and have demonstrated their commitment and dedication through their work on behalf of First Nations/Aboriginal people in Canada. Their commitment to the traditions and cultures of First Nations people is reflected throughout the book.

The authors are very careful to ensure that readers realize that there are many other voices and viewpoints within the First Nations community. Too often, Canadians of non-Indian descent assume that there is only one viewpoint or that the First Nations communities are monolithic. Nothing could be further from the truth if one were to explore the cultures and world views of the approximately three hundred First Nations communities in Canada today. The communities may be grouped within major nations like the Cree, Ojibway, Mohawk, MicMac, Squamish, Dene, Huron, Montagnais, Dakota and many others across this great country of Canada. The authors are also aware that in the First Nations "community", people are very critical of those who declare themselves as experts or voices on behalf of all of the First Nations communities in Canada. It should be noted, however, that in Ovide Mercredi's case he has been provided with the authority as well as the forum to present the political viewpoints of the First Nations communities in Canada through his role

4. *Supra* note 2 at 164.

as the Grand Chief of The Assembly of First Nations. It is refreshing to see the discretion exercised by Mr. Mercredi and Ms. Turpel.

The sole criticism of the book is that it is too general and does not provide a detailed analysis of the issues including the legal problems confronting First Nations' people in Canada. The book confirms the existence of the problems for many First Nations activists and others who have some awareness of the issues. However, there are no innovative resolutions proposed by the authors. To give credit to the authors, it may not be possible to innovate but rather to continue the work with the realization that the solutions may take decades to accomplish.

In the Rapids is a valuable contribution to Canadian literature on Aboriginal issues. It is one of the few books in existence which provide a snapshot of the issues affecting Aboriginal communities in Canada today for both the Aboriginal and non-aboriginal readers.

