



Emily Belmonte

Winner of the Odessa Prize for The Study of Canada, 2020-21

The Odessa Prize is awarded for the best essay written in English or French in an undergraduate fourth-year course on a topic relevant to the study of Canada.

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We Are All Treaty People: Understanding Why Indigenous People Signed Treaties

An interview with Emily Belmonte who was awarded the [Odessa Prize for the Study of Canada](#) for the best undergraduate paper in a fourth-year course for *Understanding Treaty One: Subsistence and Survival 1871-1888*.

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Please tell us about your honours thesis.

My honours thesis was focused on interpreting the history of [Treaty One](#) (between the Crown and the Chippewa and Cree First Nations of Manitoba). Using secondary scholarship and primary source archival research from the [Department of Indian Affairs](#), my paper unravels the layers of events which preceded the signing and its immediate aftermath in the 1870's. It uncovers the motivations, spirit and intent behind why Indigenous people signed treaties in contrast with the government's rationale for using treaties as their primary tool of dispossession and assimilation. The story is one very much centered on survival and how Indigenous people in Manitoba were given false promises and assurances of a better future in order for the Canadian government to expand into the Northwest. I argue that all treaties including Treaty 1 must be analyzed with the understanding that the spirit of the time was not to cede land, but to share in its abundance.

What drew you to this topic?

My interest in Indigenous history began during my second year at York University following a Political Science course taught by Professor Emily Merson, as well as a Canadian history course taught by Professor Sean Kheraj. From these classes I was drawn to how environmental history and Indigenous studies overlapped in Canada, and I was especially thrilled to work with Professor Kheraj after seeing how enthusiastic, and knowledgeable he is about the environmental impacts of colonization and how that intimately affected Indigenous people in this country.

I wanted to learn more about the treaty process in Canada. I was interested in starting at Treaty 1 because it was the first of the numbered treaties and it set a precedent for the rest that followed.

I come from an immigrant family, my mom and grandparents were all born in Italy, and they came to Canada in 1965, my dad was born in Canada as was my brother and I. Growing up I often heard from relatives that they came to Canada to "make a better life for themselves" and I often thought to myself at whose expense was this possible? Therefore, because I found myself in the position of studying history at York, I felt a sense of responsibility to learn more about settler colonialism and what our obligations are to Indigenous people as Treaty people. It is important that accountability takes place and I want to be able to have the tools and knowledge to educate my family so that we dismantle the barriers, prejudices and internal biases that exist as a result of



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history being told from one perspective and often one that usually does not portray an accurate representation of the past.

Why do you think others should be interested in this topic?

Canadians should not only be *interested* but they should feel a sense of *urgency* to learn about the history of the land they are privileged to live on and how its first people were treated so shamefully at the hands of the government. Canadians need to understand the treaty making period, how we are all treaty people and how there were very specific promises and rights granted to Indigenous people during the treaty process that were never upheld in a very deliberate process to secure land acquisitions and pave the way for agrarian settlement.

Learning about the Treaties should be an important step in education, as part of the Truth and Reconciliation process in Canada. Typically, in elementary and high schools these topics are rarely discussed and when they are it is from a Eurocentric perspective that does not do justice to the complex history. Deep rooted prejudices and misconceptions still exist in Canadian society towards Indigenous people as a direct result of a failure to represent history accurately and truthfully. Although some would argue that the treaty process, one that occurred over a century ago, is an outdated topic, this could not be further from the truth. Indigenous people in Canada are still suffering hardships as a result of the government failure to uphold treaty rights. This should be a topic of high priority for all Canadians to learn about, and for the Canadian government to meaningfully address.

Tell us about challenges that you as a researcher had to overcome to do this work.

Writing this paper was one of the most challenging, yet most rewarding, experiences of my entire undergrad.

Being a history major I am very accustomed to scouring through physical library shelves to find books and materials, so initially it was an adjustment to learn how to do all my research, both secondary and archival, online as a result of the global pandemic.

Regarding the ethical and emotional challenge, it was certainly heartbreaking to read some of the archival material which dealt with passionate outcries from Indigenous chiefs pleading with the government to uphold the legal assurances that were made to them. Interpreting the archival sources from the mid to late 1800's was a challenge, but one that I found to be so interesting to analyze. I was very careful to choose the most appropriate sources to ensure I was re-telling the story in an ethical way as to give a voice to those who are often forgotten about in history. I often found sources which were without author names, dates or locations, and with this in particular Professor Kheraj was always a great support in helping me string together all the pieces of the puzzle.

Aside from challenges that arose from research methodology, my family and I suffered a devastating loss with the passing of my grandfather, Santo Belmonte, after his battle with dementia. He was very supportive of this paper and my studies in general. He was



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so proud, which certainly gave me the motivation and inspiration to write this paper and to have the strength to push through. I know he would have been ecstatic to have learned that I received this award.

How well do you think the mainstream media has covered Indigenous history and rights in Canada?

From what I have seen in the media, there is a striking lack of coverage of Indigenous issues in the mainstream news as well as a distortion of the truth. A couple of prime examples include the Oka Crisis back in 1990 regarding ancestral land, as well as the current epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women, who seem to never receive the media attention they deserve in order to conduct proper investigations into their disappearances.

Recently, the media has paid some attention to the uncovering of Indigenous children's remains from Residential Schools, however and importantly, for Indigenous people they have known this information for decades and had been pleading for so long for the bodies of their children to be found. It is horrific to think of the pain and trauma that this brings to the surface for Indigenous families having to relive these painful experiences.

In specific regard to treaties, the legal system and the government often do not take the Indigenous perspective or the context of the time period into account when understanding treaties and implementing them in the courts. This is one of the reasons I am passionate about this topic because I wanted to shine the light directly on the other side of the story that is often neglected and/or purposely omitted from the dominant narrative to not damage Canada's reputation as a benevolent nation.

Unfortunately, there has been a very poor response from our past and present political leaders regarding Indigenous issues such as treaties, violence and homelessness just to name a few. Clean drinking water is a serious issue many Indigenous reserves face, in addition to the trauma and language loss resulting from colonization. There is so much work for this and future governments to do in order to address many of the inequalities that exist. The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* outlines 94 calls to action around issues of health, education and autonomy. The majority of these have not been implemented. Although there have been some improvements, the job is far from complete. There is a strong need for reconciliation between settlers and Indigenous people in order for us to create a community built on harmony and the elimination of the deep seeded prejudices that exist. Much unlearning needs to occur amongst Canadians, therefore as a future teacher I am eager to continue this education with young students.

What's next for you?

It was so bittersweet to have finished my history degree, as it was truly the most amazing experience. This Honours Thesis was the final paper of my Specialized Honours History Degree, which I completed this past April 2021. I was very proud to have also won a history department award and a Jewish Studies award in this final year for papers I wrote in Professor David Koffman's class and Professor Rachel



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Koopmans class. In addition to history, I am also a concurrent education student in the Bachelor of Education program. This September will be my final year of teachers college and so I will graduate with both degrees as an Ontario Certified Teacher in June 2022.

I am certainly eager to get into the workforce and start teaching once I graduate, but I’m also sad to be leaving the history department (at least for now). I will be certified to teach the primary and junior grades, but one day I may also consider teaching history at the senior and intermediate levels as well. I am very excited to teach the young students about important topics like Treaties and I am happy to have had this opportunity as I now feel better prepared to teach this history effectively. I am not sure what the future holds but completing an MA in History is certainly something I may consider down the road especially if I had the opportunity to work with one of the very talented professors York’s history department has—it would undoubtedly be an incredible experience and one I have given a lot of thought to.

Any final thoughts?

It was an absolute pleasure to write this paper and a great honour to be awarded the Odessa Prize for the Study of Canada. It was incredible to witness the paper come together over a series of eight months from the research stage to the final writing stage. I am very thankful to Professor Kheraj for helping to make my last year of undergrad so memorable and for helping me grow academically as a historian.

I also am overjoyed to receive news that this work has been awarded the Best Canadian Studies Undergraduate Essay/Thesis Prize from the Canadian Studies Network. It came as such a huge surprise, and I am so thankful to the Robarts Centre for their nomination. It fills me with pride to know that my paper was so well received by scholars in Canada. I am truly grateful.

Finally, I have enormous gratitude for the lifetime of support I received from my family and friends along the way as they have always encouraged my pursuits.