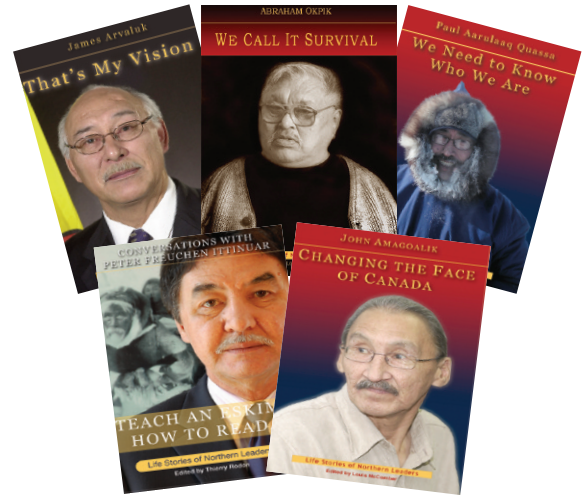


Building Canada from the top down

Abraham Okpik, John Amagoalik, Paul Quassa, James Arvaluk, Peter Itinnuar. *Life Stories of Northern Leaders*. 5 vols. Iqaluit, NU: Nunavut Arctic College, 2005-08.

Review by Terry Fenge



Yann Martel characterizes Canada as a grand hotel, a place to visit on a journey ending elsewhere, and Noah Richler begins his national literary atlas by inviting the cream of Canadian authors to respond to the concept of Canada as “nowhere.”

This questionable identification reflects the country’s sheer size and forbidding climate, mile upon mile of “wilderness” and the fact that most Canadians live in cities hugging the border with the United States. We naturally look south to the USA rather than to ourselves for models and affirmation, and we certainly do not look to the North. Originally from Spain, Martel is naturally peripatetic, but even second- and some third-generation Canadians retain a sense that they originate from and owe residual affinity and loyalty to somewhere else.

In their life histories, Paul Aarulaaq Quassa, Abraham Okpik, Peter Freuchen Itinnuar, John Amagoalik and James Arvaluk, five Inuit well known in northern Canada but not household names in the south, adopt a very different view of Canada and the experience of being Canadian. They talk compellingly of kith and kin, culture, language, land and wildlife, relationships with *kabloona* (Whites), and joining Canada, their political and constitutional “home.” Inuit have been here a long time. Thule Inuit migrated across North America from the

Bering Sea about 1,000 years ago, following earlier migrations along similar routes by Dorset and Pre-Dorset Inuit.

In the 1970s Milton Freeman documented the use and occupancy by Inuit of almost 4 million square kilometres of land and frozen ocean. An accurate total would have been considerably greater, but his remit excluded Quebec and Labrador. Northern Canada may be defined by seemingly limitless “empty” space, and Europeans may have trouble appreciating Canada’s size and what it means to live in the world’s second-largest country, but as Labrador Inuit said years ago, “Our footprints are everywhere.” The Arctic is not *terra nullius* (unoccupied land) — the legal fiction that saved the consciences of colonizers as they took land from Aboriginal peoples in what they were pleased to call the “new world.”

The Arctic horizon may go on and on, but even small landscape features are known and named by Inuit, and many sites have histories and spiritual values that elders and hunters can vividly recall. Prime Minister Harper was being extraordinarily ignorant as well as blasé when he said Canadians should “use or lose” the Arctic in order to assert sovereignty over it, as if the region hasn’t and isn’t being used by Inuit who are, by and large, proud citizens of Canada.

If we must have a non-Inuit framework from which to appreciate these five life histories, let it be John Ralston Saul’s

A Fair Country. He sees the inherent right of Aboriginal self-government, acknowledged by the Government of Canada in 1995, and the establishment of the Nunavut Territory in 1999 pursuant to the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement as a return of sorts to the delicate balance of the 17th and 18th centuries between the English, French and Aboriginal peoples. Saul suggests that Nunavut “completes” Canada and is, perhaps, a kind of Canadian manifest destiny, one that is entirely different from that which underlay US President Andrew Jackson’s 1830 *Indian Removal Act*.

In a very real sense, these five life histories explain and elaborate the whys and wherefores of the campaign by Inuit to establish Nunavut as a formal homeland.

Enfranchised federally in 1960, Inuit were semi-nomadic until well into the 1960s, and with few formally educated leaders, they persuaded Canada through negotiation rather than political protest to establish Nunavut. In so doing they helped federal politicians rediscover the political will to accommodate the self-government, land ownership and cultural aspirations of Aboriginal peoples. The *Globe and Mail* supported the establishment of Nunavut, characterizing it as compatible with “sensible liberal principles.”

Many of the Inuit who led the Nunavut campaign in the 1980s and

1990s first met in the 1960s and 1970s at the residential Vocational School in Churchill. Federal authorities thought they were churning out plumbers, carpenters and electricians, not savvy politicians who, to quote John Amagoalik, “changed the face of Canada.”

It is from these engagingly written and informative life histories that we learn just what it was like for Peter Ittinuar to be Canada’s first Inuit member of Parliament, and how John Amagoalik and his family survived relocation from Inukjuaak in northern Quebec to the spartan shores of Resolute Bay on Cornwallis Island, in the early 1950s, by scrounging through the local dump for food, clothing and building materials.

The essential feature of these life histories is the exercise of power by outsiders — churches, RCMP, federal agencies, the Hudson’s Bay Company — on Inuit, settled in communities in the years following the Second World War. This highly independent people with quite extraordinary land-based skills was pauperized, all with the best of intentions, of course.

But these life histories are tales not of suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, demoralization and cultural decay, but of how grievances were turned into positive political agendas around the principle of self-government and how political institutions, including Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (now Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami), the Nunavut Constitutional Forum and the Tungavik Federation of Nunavut, were used to achieve political goals.

At the time, negotiations with the Government of Canada seemed interminably slow, but far-reaching land claims agreements were finalized by Inuit in northern Quebec in 1975, the Beaufort Sea region in 1984, Nunavut in 1993 and Labrador in 2005. Consistency of purpose, good political leadership, skilled communications using the resources of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, effective political strategies to cultivate the support of the Canadian public, and a commitment to using the Canadian political system paid dividends.

Paul Quassa, chief negotiator for the Inuit of Nunavut in the late 1980s and early 1990s, frets about promises made in

the Nunavut Agreement but not kept, and he urges Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, the Inuit organization implementing the agreement, to promote Inuktitut by emulating Quebec’s uncompromising stand on French language rights. But the four comprehensive land claims agreements — modern treaties — signed by Inuit and the Crown have put the relationship between Inuit and Canada on a footing unimagined until very recently, at least by those in the urban south. Inuit now own more land outright, that is, in fee simple, than any other private interest worldwide.

Foreign politicians, academics and the simply curious continue to turn up in Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut, to ask how it all happened. A helpful reply would be to recommend these five life histories.

Terry Fenge is an Ottawa-based consultant. From 1985 to 1993 he was director of research for the Tungavik Federation of Nunavut. He currently assists Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated in implementing the 1993 Nunavut Land Claims Agreement.

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