

The Legacy of Grand Chief George Manuel

“Neither Left nor Right, we must find our own path as the Fourth World”

By Rudolph C. Rýser, PhD



Grand-Chief George Manuel.

The ground was wet and puddles collected in the low spots reflecting the grayness of the clouded sky. The smell of winter approaching filled the air and an eagle floated on the air currents above the nearby mountain ridge. Hundreds of people from many nations were milling around the building, talking softly while others slowly filed through the weathered double doors at one end. More people waited patiently in their cars on the highway in front of the Community Center -waiting for the Neskonlith Band Police and volunteer helpers to give directions for parking.

Inside the Community Center, which sits on a somewhat hilly and grassy meadow between the highway and a wall of mountainous granite dotted with pine trees, more people crowded inside the entryway to join the line moving slowly past the chestnut casket bearing the body of Grand Chief George Manuel to pay their last respects. He laid there as if at peace for the first time during his sixty-eight years, in a beaded deer skin jacket and in his right hand an eagle feather fan. As in life, George Manuel gave you a sense of confidence and strength - a feeling each person carried into the comforting embrace of Marlene Manuel, sons and daughters, grandchildren, a great-granddaughter, brother, sisters and a cousin.

Late in the day, at the Neskonlith Cemetery, the hundreds of people who had come to the Neskonlith Reserve in the Southwest part of Shuswap territory on November 20, 1989 joined as one to give George Manuel's body back to the earth and to send his spirit to the next world. The air was crisply cold and small flakes of snow began to fall. Leaders of many nations stepped up to each participate in the burial by taking a shovel in hand and moving the rich soil from a mound into George's grave. When George's body was safely in its resting place, old and young women sang. Russell Jim of the Yakima Nation then sang an ancient song from his people to help George's spirit into the other world.

The Neskonlith people had prepared a great feast of deer, salmon, potatoes, corn and salads and all joined in a large hall in Chase as darkness fell. As people ate, George Manuel's friends and family rose one-by-one to speak - to remind everyone through stories and song what this man had given this world. The Nuxalk people performed an ancient dance in costumes and carved masks to finally carry George's spirit to the other world. It was done.

Some seek greatness, others are called to greatness and still others are destined from the beginning of their lives. Grand Chief George Manuel was destined to greatness. He began his life on February 21, 1921 in Shuswap in a time when the Canadian government had made it a crime for native people to practice their ancient religions, the customs of the Potlatch. By the time George was six years old, the Canadian

government had also made it a crime for native people to organize and raise funds for political action to support aboriginal rights. Like so many Shuswap boys before him, George Manuel was sent by the government to a Residential School to "become a white man" as he once told me. In his childhood, George contracted tuberculosis which forced him to live in a sanatorium. The attempts to distort his spirit and his body were always a source of shame, and so he never volunteered to talk about these things. He preferred to remember the desperate poverty his people were forced to endure "because of Canadian government and British Columbian government policies toward the Indian."

Instead of bowing to his own personal tragedies and to the demeaning privation Indians suffered, Chief Manuel turned his mind, his spirit and his withered body to changing the social, economic and political conditions that brought Indian people to such humiliation. As a young man, he began to raise a family. He supported his family and what he called his "political work" by operating a small seed farm and then as a boom boss in the logging and lumber industry. In the 1950s, when the Canadian government began to repeal its laws denying religious and political freedom to Indians, Chief Manuel became more public about his political organizing in Shuswap communities and in neighboring nations. He put his energies into organizing political field workers and he focused on community development. George began to understand through these activities that organizing Indian people at the community level was essential if they were to

regain economic and political power -to eliminate poverty and to rebuild cultural strength.

For George Manuel in the late 1950s, the increasingly popular ideal of self-determination would not simply be an idea, it would become a force of Indian communities to decide for themselves how they would live. In 1959, he broadened his experience and honed his knowledge and his leadership when he became the President of the North American Indian Brotherhood of British Columbia. For seven years as Chief of the Shuswap Indian Reserve and President of the Brotherhood George worked to promote community development on reserves throughout the province of British Columbia and to press for reforms in Canadian federal and provincial government policies toward Indians. To achieve reforms in the government he later took a position in the Department of Indian Affairs. But George became impatient with reforms when in 1969 Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau issued the White Paper, a government policy document which announced Canada's intention to dissolve Indian nations and promote the "assimilation of Indian people into Canadian society."

Trudeau's White Paper was the last straw for Chief Manuel. His years spent trying to reform Canadian government policies had failed. "Canada was dead set on wiping out Indians once and for all," George recalled later. Collecting what he called the "best and the brightest Indian people I could find," George Manuel sought and won the Presidency of the National Indian Brotherhood

in 1970. With the added power and resources of a country-wide organization and his "best and brightest," he set his mind and the whole of Indian Country in Canada to a strategy to defeat "Trudeau's White Paper." In countless speeches, meetings, interviews and strategy sessions, he beat the drum of resistance to Canada's assimilation policy. He urged the mightiest to turn the policy around and he pushed for more community political organization in the reserves.

"If we didn't fight then," he recalled later, "Trudeau would have destroyed all the Indian people in Canada." In search of "help for my people" Chief Manuel traveled to Tanzania as a member of a Canadian government delegation. And quite by coincidence and absence of the delegation's leader, Tanzania's President Julius Kambarage Nyerere received Chief Manuel as the Canadian government's chief representative. Treated as a head of state, Chief Manuel decided to take advantage of the situation and entered into lengthy private discussions with President Nyerere about ways that Tanzania could help "your brown brothers in Canada."

President Nyerere, as George retold the story, responded by describing how Tanzania achieved her independence in 1964 without a revolution or a shot fired.

"I traveled from village to village among all the tribes in what was then called Tanganyika," Nyerere recounted. "By meeting with the people directly, I was able to persuade them of how we could achieve independence and freedom."

“You have an independent country now. Won’t you help the Indians in Canada?” George queried.

“No, I won’t help now, not until you organize your people first. Only after the people decide on what they really want can I be of any help,” Nyerere responded.

“I was so mad at what Nyerere had said, I couldn’t believe a black man wouldn’t help brown people,” George later recalled. He thought he had wasted his time, and he was now deeply troubled that a leader of another tribe who was the President of a Third World state wasn’t willing to help Indian people.

In 1971, George was asked to be a member of another Canadian Delegation, this one made up of Members of Parliament. The delegation traveled to New Zealand on “an evaluation tour of Maori programs.” Here Chief Manuel discovered quite a different response to his calls for support of the Indians of Canada. Visiting with Maori people he learned “they were just like us!” George began to understand that there were “other peoples in the world who had the same kinds of experiences as Indians in Canada.” “I thought,” he recalled, “the Maoris could help us and we could help them!.” With this realization came yet another: “Nyerere was right! The people must first be organized at the community level and they can help each other.” What George discovered was something he had already known.

With ideas beginning to crystallize about community organization and international cooperation, Chief Manuel sought out his counterpart in the United States: President Mel Tonasket of the National Congress of American

Indians. George traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with Tonasket and eventually they signed an international agreement in 1973 to establish technical exchanges between the National Brotherhood and the National Congress of American Indians. This agreement led to another agreement between the two organizations to coordinate a number of meetings between “Indians in Africa, the Americas and the Pacific” as George would often call other native peoples.

Meanwhile, Chief Manuel’s ideas began to take shape about how the Shuswap people could be helped by neighboring tribes and other native peoples in the world could help each other. His fifty-two years of growing and learning by actual experience were then to be condensed into a book: *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* (Collier Macmillan, Canada, Ltd. 1974; Free Press, New York 1974). Realizing that while Shuswaps must help themselves and “decide for themselves what they want” they must also work with other peoples to give and receive help as well.

Seeing with his own eyes as he had through years of “political work,” George concluded that the First World, Second World and the Third World would not come to the aid of his people. But he had made a profound discovery as a result of his travels to other parts of the world and his visits with other native peoples: “We share the same vision and the same experiences and we are alike in our traditional ways.” He learned that the concepts of the “Sacred Four Directions” and the “Sacred Circle” were common to nearly all native peoples he had met. The original nations throughout the world, George reasoned, are the Fourth World.

With this new structure of ideas and the agreement he had forged with the National Congress of American Indians, he continued to travel across Canada, South America, Central America, Australia, and Northern Europe to meet with “those other Indians.” The frenetic pace he set caused many to tire, but finally in 1975 at Port Alberni, Canada Chief George Manuel presided over the first meeting of native representatives from throughout the world - a meeting that founded the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. Based on the principles of “community consent” and self-determination, the World Council of Indigenous Peoples made up of representatives from Fourth World Nations was formally established with Chief Manuel as its first President.

From 1975 to 1981, George remained the President of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. With the energy of a man half his age, he traveled extensively to Indian villages in Northern Argentina, to the Quechua villages in the high mountains of Peru, to Samiland in Sweden, Indian reservations in the United States, to Yapti Tasbia in Eastern Nicaragua, to Mapuche villages in Chile and to the Mayan refugee camps on the border between Mexico and Guatemala. Everywhere he went, the people recognized George Manuel, even though they had never actually seen his face before.

At the Second General Assembly of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples in Samiland, Sweden (1977) Chief Manuel pressed for the Council to adopt a declaration calling for the international community to proclaim a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

With respect for his wishes, the Council not only adopted the declaration, but by virtue of that act set in motion a political wind that brushes the face of Fourth World peoples on every continent even today. Within ten years from the Council’s declaration, the United Nations began deliberations on the principles and terms to be contained in a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

While giving his strength to the formation of a global network of Fourth World nations, Chief Manuel continued to emphasize community organization among his Shuswap people. To emphasize his commitment to the continuing struggle against Canadian government policies of assimilation, George had, in addition to his commitments to the World Council of Indigenous Peoples, become the President of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs. By the end of the 1970s, Chief Manuel recognized that while Canadian Premier Trudeau’s White Paper had been effectively defeated, the same threat in a different form had surfaced. Trudeau revealed in the middle 1970s that the White Paper was only the first volley aimed at Indian nations. Indeed, it became apparent that the assimilation policy of 1969 was to become an important element of Canada’s effort to become independent from Great Britain. Prime Minister Trudeau had begun to fashion what would become known as the “Constitutional Process” or the Canadian goal to “repatriate the Canadian Constitution.”

A key obstacle to Canadian independence was the political visibility of Indian nations. Premier Trudeau considered Indian claims to vast areas of what Canada claimed as its domain a threat

to Canadian stability. His solution, originally enunciated in the “White Paper” remained high as a hidden policy in the “Constitutional Repatriation Process.”

Chief Manuel recognized early that Trudeau had shifted his attack on Indian nations into the constitutional initiative. It was his recognition of the subtle shift that caused George to place before the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs the “Aboriginal Rights” position paper. Asserting original ownership to aboriginal territories, the position paper provided the foundation for a strategy to counter Trudeau’s subtle attack on Indian nations through the constitutional process. In 1980, Chief Manuel called upon the British government and the Canadian government to recognize in a new Canadian Constitution a “third level of government” - Indian governments alongside provincial governments and the federal government in confederation.

To give emphasis to his call, Chief Manuel began to direct the organization of a monumental movement called the “Constitution Express.” As a politicizing device for Indian communities and a political force aimed at dramatizing the right of Indian nations to exercise self-government as a third level of government within the federation of Canada, the “Constitution Express” was literally a train carrying Indians from scores of reserves to Ottawa to meet with members of the Canadian parliament. At the same time, George organized and sent a delegation of sixty Chiefs and tribal

members to New York City to conduct “briefing sessions” with key state missions to the United Nations. Meanwhile, about six hundred Indians from many nations were organized to travel to England to meet with members of parliament there and to meet with political leaders in other European capitols. His ability to mobilize thousands of Indians to lobby Canadian Members of Parliament, British officials, other European officials and United Nations officials shocked Canadian politicians. Never had they conceived the ability of one man to command the allegiance of so many to promote Indian Rights - Indian Government.

As if to say to President Nyerere, “I have visited the villages, and the people of the Fourth World know what they want - self-government and freedom,” Chief George Manuel had demonstrated that the Indian peoples of Canada could reach for self-determination and make a choice. He had expanded upon the concept of community organization by reaching out to other native peoples and conceiving of the Fourth World. He had breathed life into native communities all over the world where hopelessness became replaced with confidence and high aspirations. He opened the eyes of millions to the wrongs being done to native peoples; and he instilled in millions more the desire to achieve great things to right those wrongs. Grand Chief George Manuel’s legacy to us all are these things and more.

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