Two Families: Treaties and Government

Book By: Harold Johnson
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Reviewed by Reverend Alex McGilvary

Two Families by Harold Johnson is a thin little book that took me ages to read. I would read a chapter then put it down, but it pulled me back to read more. The book is Harold's view of the treaty relationship between the Cree people of Treaty 6 in northern Saskatchewan and the Government of Canada. It is his premise that the treaty doesn't confer rights on the First Nations people, but rather it confers rights on the new settlers – the Canadian Government. The land is native land and the treaties in his understanding do not give away the land, but just allow people to join the First Nations in living upon it.

It isn't Johnson's thesis that made the book a struggle to read, but the overly patient “You choose to live anyway you like, but this is the right way” paternal tone of the first part of the book. Johnson refers to the reader as “cousin” and lectures the reader on the difference between native and white culture. He keeps returning to the idea that while whites may choose to live in their dysfunctional society; they can’t, and shouldn’t try, to force First Nations people to live in that same society. The interesting thing that happened was that I started to hear what white culture must sound like in native ears. We say we value their culture, but our actions are paternalistic and degrading. Reading this book was an exercise in humility, and I need to confess that I needed the lesson.

The latter part of the book moves away from the relationship between the First Nations people and the Government into a discussion of particular aspects of interaction. I found this section both easier to take and fascinating reading. I especially like his take on the broken justice system that sends native people to prison far away from home and teaches them an even more dysfunctional culture to bring home. His contention is that First Nations people should be under the jurisdiction of First Nations justice systems which would be very different in process than Canadian courts.

I recommend this book to anyone who wants to get a perspective on a First Nations view of Canada. Two Families does not claim to speak for all Nations, or even all Cree in Treaty 6, but it is an education and well worth the effort to read.