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Murray Sinclair to host launch for book on early Canadian interpreters



HEARD ON THE HILL

by Neil Moss

Energy, reconciliation, and Canada-China relationship in the spotlight at Pearson Conference



Murray Sinclair, left, will host a launch for Jean Delisle's new book, *Interprètes au pays du castor*, on Feb. 27. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade and book cover image courtesy of Presses de l'Université Laval

During the height of pre-Confederation trading, interpreters served as important links between settlers and Indigenous peoples. A new book looks at 15 of them and their impact on Canadian culture, politics, and trade.

Independent Senator **Murray Sinclair** will host a launch for **Jean Delisle's** new book, *Interprètes au pays du castor*, on Feb. 27 at 1 Wellington St.

Sen. Sinclair was the chief commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the first Indigenous judge appointed in Manitoba.

"As key actors amongst Indigenous peoples, Caucasians, and Inuit, interpreters played an

important and yet little-known role in the history of Canada," according to the book's description. "The interpreters brought to life in these pages all had an extraordinary destiny."

Some interpreters have been named persons of national historic significance by the Canadian government, including **Pierre Boucher** and **Jean Baptiste Lolo**.

Prof. Delisle is a Royal Society of Canada fellow and a University of Ottawa emeritus professor.

The book launch will start at 6 p.m. The 374-page book is being published by Presses de l'Université Laval.

nmoss@hilltimes.com
The Hill Times

Book Excerpt

Interpreters built bridges between First Nations and newcomers

Les interprètes au pays du Castor relates the gripping and thought-provoking stories of the people who were among Canada's first interpreters. This collection of in-depth portraits casts new light on some 15 interpreters and their impact on the culture, politics and trade of Canada, the 'Land of the Beaver.'



Jean Delisle
Books

Canada's history is an epic of manifold encounters between Indigenous peoples living on a vast continent of forests laced with lakes and rivers, and bold adventurers who had crossed the Atlantic to explore a new world. It is at the crossroads of race, peoples, and civilizations that Canada was born.

From the very beginning of this incredible human adventure, Indigenous, Métis, and white interpreters turned their hand to building bridges between First Nations and newcomers.

With the passing of time, interpreters grew in number, becoming key players in the new social order. Fur traders paid them well, granting them special privileges to retain their services.

By facilitating communication, interpreters fostered understanding that sometimes grew into alliances, mutual support, even lasting friendships.

These interpreters were commercial agents, conciliators, advisers, diplomats, treaty negotiators and peacemakers. Some were

also hunters, guides, teachers, civil servants, soldiers, missionaries' helpers and fur traders.

They were of diverse origin: American, British, Canadian, French, Indigenous, and Inuit. Among them were English speakers, French speakers.

Jerry Potts, interpreter for the North-West Mounted Police at the end of the 19th century

Soon after Jerry Potts—a Métis interpreter from Alberta—joined the fledgling Mounted Police in 1874, he began guiding most of the important patrols, training scouts, and acting as the liaison officer with Indigenous people. Thanks to him, the small and understaffed police force managed to keep law and order while gaining the trust of the First Nations.

What would have become of Western Canada were it not for Jerry Potts?

Surely, with his firm grasp, the Mounted Police's mission, and his

in-depth knowledge of Indigenous culture, ways, and traditions, Potts had a profound effect on the pace and direction of development in Western Canada at the time.

Potts spoke many languages including English, Sioux and the many dialects of the Blackfoot nation. He knew the territory like the back of his hand.

And, because he was on such good terms with the chiefs of the Blackfoot tribe, he was able to explain the details of Treaty 7 and reluctantly advise them to sign it. Potts was a pragmatist. He saw the treaty as the lesser of two evils.

Potts' influence extended beyond Alberta. For example, he advised the Blackfoot chiefs to remain neutral during the Red River Métis uprising led by Louis Riel.

Just imagine. If the Mounties did not have Potts how the West might be different then and today.

There is no way of telling, given the many economic and sociopolitical factors coming into play in history. Still, Jerry Potts, without a doubt, had a hand in fashioning the history of the West.

Sad though this made him, Potts was resigned to the fact that change

for the Métis people was inevitable. Indigenous peoples were up against overwhelming odds. Their way of life was becoming unsustainable. Potts' people would have to partly abandon their traditions to live like settlers, farming the land and raising cattle. It was profoundly humiliating for such proud warriors

to undertake what had been thought of until then as women's work.

Throughout the 19th century, colonialists devised policies to assimilate the Indigenous peoples or, at very least, keep them out of sight by confining them to reserves. This attack on their traditional ways of life brought great suffering to the peoples of the First Nations who, to this day, grapple with its aftermath. Truly, the past begets the future.

Jean Delisle is a professor emeritus at the University of Ottawa and a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. His book

will be launched on Thursday, Feb. 27, at a wine and cheese reception hosted by Senator Murray Sinclair which will take place at 1 Wellington Street (room W110) from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. This excerpt has been reprinted with permission.

Interprètes au pays du castor, by Jean Delisle, PUL, 365 pp., \$39.95. The Hill Times



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