



Oka: A Political Crisis and Its Legacy

Harry Swain

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On July 11, 1990, tension between white and Mohawk people at Oka, just west of Montreal, took a violent turn. At issue was the town's plan to turn a piece of disputed land in the community of Kanesatake into a golf course. Media footage of rock-throwing white residents and armed, masked Mohawk Warriors facing police across barricades shocked the world and galvanized Aboriginal people across the continent. In August, Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa called for the Canadian army to step in.

Harry Swain was deputy minister of Indian Affairs throughout the 78 -day standoff, and his recreation of events is dramatic and opinionated. Swain writes frankly about his own role and offers fascinating profiles of the high-level players on the government's side. Swain offers rare insight into the workings of government in a time of crisis, but he also traces what he calls the 200-year tail of history and shows how the Mohawk experience reflects the collision between European and Aboriginal cultures.

Twenty years on, health, social and economic indicators for Aboriginals are still shameful. Identifying current flashpoints for Aboriginal land rights across the country, Swain argues that true reconciliation will not be possible until government commits to meaningful reform.

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