

# Tshaukuesh Elizabeth Penashue. Nitinikiau Innusi: 166 I Keep the Land Alive. Edited by Elizabeth Yeoman

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Tshaukuesh Elizabeth Penashue. *Nitinikiau Innusi: I Keep the Land Alive*. Edited by Elizabeth Yeoman. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2019. ISBN 978-0-887-55840-5

I am pleased and not surprised to see *Nitinikiau Innusi: I Keep the Land Alive* garnering book award nominations across Canada. Tshaukuesh Elizabeth Penashue's book is the story of the Innu, yes, but it is also the story of Indigenous people everywhere, living, or trying to live, on land that was once theirs but has been encroached upon and is being destroyed.

The book is reader-friendly, easily accessible to junior high school students, and based on diaries and letters kept by Innu elder, activist, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother Elizabeth Penashue. It responds to the bemusement non-Innu sometimes experience reading sensational media stories. Scholar Elizabeth Yeoman helped order, translate, edit, and present Penashue's story. Yeoman's section on methodology will serve other researchers and biographers well. After Yeoman's Introduction, the book benefits from her wise decision to retreat, placing the diaries front and centre. Penashue brings readers into her world and allows them to see life from an Innu perspective.

*Nitinikiau Innusi: I Keep the Land Alive* is beautifully produced. It features numerous photographs dating from Penashue's youth when she learned writing from an abusive priest. There is an attractive map with Labrador place names identified in Innu-aimun, including a bombing range signified by a helicopter and a sharp-nosed fighter jet. Other symbols are Innu: caribou, tents, the wind. These pages contain a photographic history of the years-long Innu protests against NATO low-level flying, from roadside "caution" signs to arrests. We also see the late Penote (Ben) Michel in front of microphones on Parliament Hill, former Newfoundland Premier Clyde Wells, who was not known for his informality, sitting on an upturned salt beef bucket, and a smiling Queen Elizabeth II crouching down to take the hands of seated Innu women. These are all priceless pictures and the latter two, taken in Innu tents, cannot help but make the reader grin.

The photos speak to the high profile of the Innu, who, in the late 1980s, became internationally known. This was especially true of their leaders, Penashue among the most prominent. The politicization of the Innu crystallized with NATO incursion into Nitassinan, the Quebec–Labrador Peninsula of the Innu, through training flights from the Canadian base at Goose Bay. “The fighter jets shatter our happiness,” Penashue writes in 1988, “they have no respect” (11). If you have not witnessed low-level flying, know that it is sudden, loud, and frightening. The first time I experienced these flights, I dove to the ground in alarm. Labrador experienced thousands of low-level flights every year, all concentrated in the months from spring to fall. Penashue describes the anxiety that parents felt every day, not knowing when their children would be subjected to the next sonic boom. The animals, too, suffered, and this was a huge concern for the Innu.

On 20 March 1988 Penashue was arrested while protesting non-violently (later in the book she refers to Mahatma Gandhi). She includes a photo of the two young white male arresting officers looking disoriented as they take Penashue away to jail. But this was not Penashue’s first encounter with *Akaneshau* (white) law. The year before, she and other Innu women had sat on caribou they had hunted so the RCMP could not take the carcasses as evidence. This grandmother was an unlikely candidate for a prison cell but she was driven. Innu economic and cultural practices were being criminalized. Penashue obeyed Innu law, and Innu law mandated that she protect the land from the destruction she was witnessing; it also impelled her to use the land and its animals as Innu had done since time immemorial. There are hints in Penashue’s brief accounts of these two incidents that her community is finally gaining a sense of its power. She knows that government did not expect the Innu to fight back.

Penashue sees *nutshimut* — loosely translated as Innu life on the land and the serene feeling it brings — as a school, the vehicle through which Innu children learn to be Innu. Repeatedly she states her concern that Innu knowledge and practices are being lost as the country is degraded; this is a conviction she never loses.

What has been happening to Nitassinan? The laundry list of developments in which the Innu had no voice in policy decisions includes coerced settlement into Sheshatshiu and Davis Inlet (followed by resettlement from Davis Inlet to Natuashish), mining, logging (which led to the visit by Clyde Wells), urbanization in central Labrador, the militarization of the Labrador economy, NATO's years-long low-level flight training program on land it deemed unoccupied, and hydroelectric developments at Churchill Falls and, later, Muskrat Falls. The Innu learned about the Churchill Falls dam, so jealously claimed by many in Newfoundland, when they went upriver and discovered their tools, pots, and even graves under water. Two decades later, low-level flying was the turning point. As Penashue writes, "I often thank the Creator that the Innu have woken up and found strength in each other to walk this long hard road together" (29). Later that fall, Innu activists prevented a fighter jet from taking off by erecting a tent on the runway. You can feel Penashue's elation as she describes this seminal incident. The Innu were then empowered and the arrests only spurred them on.

Their campaign against the powerful forces of NATO took them across Canada, to the US, and to Europe and the UK, where a sympathizer scaled Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square and hung a flag on it for all to see: "Canada, let the Innu survive." There is a parallel to the Anishnaabe activists of Grassy Narrows, Ontario, who continue to wage an international campaign; 90 per cent of this community suffers, some quite badly, from mercury poisoning after Dryden Chemicals dumped mercury in the English-Wabigoon River system in the 1960s. Although Penashue does not discuss such events, there are also the Piikani protests against a dam in southern Alberta, the Haudenosaunee occupation of proposed suburban construction at Caledonia, Ontario, and the infamous summer-long conflict at Oka or Kahnawake, Quebec, where Kanienkehaka (Mohawk) fought against a golf course being built on their land, which also included traditional burial grounds.

Living in a First Nations community in Canada seems to demand unrelenting activism. This is exhausting and punishing. Penashue is

afraid of flying; buses taking her and other Innu activists all over Ontario fatigue her; everything has to be translated for her at meetings with *Akaneshaw*; she feels torn as she worries about her children and grandchildren back home. But she must do all these things. Before a planned demonstration, Penashue and her women colleagues spend hours doing housework and preparing food for their families for when they are away. They forget to eat themselves. The prison where they often end up is cold; they are hungry; and the stress gives Penashue aches and pains. This mirrors the ongoing experience of Indigenous women activists all over Canada and beyond.

The number and weight of simultaneous, pressing issues comprise another problem affecting Innu, and many other Indigenous communities: logging issues, fishing rights, pipelines, dams, health and housing and education shortcomings all must be confronted. It is difficult for what are essentially villages to keep up, and it is virtually impossible for small communities to produce enough skilled leaders fluent in English or French to effectively tackle all these problems. Yet the Innu did it for a while and they were smart to unite the two Labrador Innu communities into the Innu Nation. The Indian Act splits large Indigenous nations into tiny bands, serving to diminish the capacity for large-scale political action.

Penashue finds comfort in her relationship with the Creator, her rosary, and St. Anne, by tradition the mother of the Virgin Mary, long revered by the Mi'kmaq of Newfoundland, the Métis of Alberta, and other Indigenous groups in Canada. In a time when Indigenous people are often and unfortunately pressed to be "authentic," Penashue does not apologize for her Indigenized Christianity, the result of historical forces and a source of positive energy for her, though she says she would never again kiss a bishop's ring, as she once did.

Penashue begins her well-known walks through Nitassinan stating, "I want people to know we won't give up our land" (130). Her diaries, while specific to her experience, allude to First Nations life experience everywhere. She struggles with poverty; one day she does not have enough food for breakfast. With disquietude, she observes

Innu disunity as community leaders take part in environmental assessments and negotiate compensation for development on their land. “A long time ago, Innu life was like a circle, everything was clear to us, but the government brainwashes us” (183). Referring to the multiple, multi-generational traumas suffered by the Innu and other Indigenous peoples, often expressed in addictions, Penashue says, “it’s impossible to measure what we’ve lost” (183).

Many of the original Innu activists have died, most of them young: Ben Michel, Daniel Ashini, Mary May Osmond, Rose Gregoire, who was Penashue’s sister, and others. Yet we are lucky that Penashue remains among us. She has successfully transformed the pain she experienced at the hands of the priest who taught her to write, and she uses this tool to advance Innu interest and to provide a valuable record of Innu and Indigenous life.

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