# The Chilcotin War and the rewriting of history

The Justin Trudeau government, assisted by all opposition parties, last week completed a masterful rewriting of history.

The prime minister joined speakers for the Conservatives, NDP, Greens and even the Bloc in apologizing for the execution of six murderers who were hanged 154 years ago, after which he hugged representatives of the Tsilhqot’in Nation on the floor of the House.

The so-called Chilcotin War of 1864 makes for an intriguing story about the clash between British colonists and First Nations — so much so that I wrote a book about it — but the facts have been so twisted for political purposes as to become almost unrecognizable.

From childhood, today’s Tsilhqot’in are taught that the Chilcotin War was a war of honour fought by brave warriors protecting their people and their land.

The basis for last week’s exoneration, which follows not one but two B.C. apologies (one in 1999 by the NDP government and another in 2014 by the Liberal government), is based on that same interpretation.

“After convening a council to declare war, they attacked the road crew near Bute Inlet and removed all settlers from their lands before taking refuge in their territory beyond the reach of the colonial militia,” Trudeau said in his own sanitized version of events.

The Tsilhqot’in simply “did as many of us would have done,” said Kamloops-Thompson-Cariboo MP Cathy McLeod for the Conservatives.

According to federal Green Party Leader Elizabeth May, the Chilcotin War was “replete with wrongs,” preceded by “sexual violence against young Indigenous women” and “biological warfare” against the Tsilhqot’in Nation.

And on it went. Guy Caron of the NDP admitted he’d never heard of the Tsilhqot’in, much less the Chilcotin War, until he was writing his speech, but as an instant expert he didn’t hesitate to conclude that “the Tsilhqot’in people took justified action to defend their territory, and they were met not only with violent escalation but with dishonour.”

Since the Chilcotin War is one of the most well-documented colonial-aboriginal conflicts in Canadian history, let’s review some of the salient facts from the record.

The death toll in the Chilcotin War included 18 Europeans and eight Tsilhqot’ins, including the six who were hanged.

The key justification for this carnage is that it was a war. If it was war, any prosecutor worth his or her salt could make a pretty good argument that the Tsilhqot’in attackers were guilty of war crimes.

But, in fact, the “Chilcotin War” is a misnomer. No war was declared, contrary to what the prime minister asserts. There was no environment of war. There was no armed invasion or attack by Europeans. There was no “escalation” and certainly no “biological warfare.”

There was, however, a massacre.

It helps to follow the thread of how the victims died.

A ferry operator, a man named Tim Smith working for the company building a road between the Coast and the Cariboo goldfields, was the first casualty.

When he refused an imposing Tsilhqot’in war chief named Klatassine (also sometimes spelled Klatsassin or Lhats’as?in) and his family free food and ammunition, Klatassine shot him in the head. It’s worthy of note that this occurred outside Tsilhqot’in territory.

After plundering the company’s supplies at the ferry, Klatassine decided it was time to kill other whites, too. Moving a few miles up to the road-building camp, he talked 11 other Tsilhqot’in men, most of whom were employed by the road company, into joining him.

This is what Trudeau calls the “council of war.”

Early next morning, they attacked the unarmed, sleeping road builders, shooting or hacking eight of them to death, then mutilating and dismembering them.

An advance work party was also attacked. Four were killed there, including foreman William ‘Willy’ Brewster, whose penis was sliced off and stuffed in his mouth, his heart cut out of his chest and eaten.

Next was William Manning, who had farmed and ranched at Puntzi Lake for a couple of years, and believed he was on friendly terms with the Tsilhqot’in. He was shot, his body mutilated and tossed in a creek.

A pack train was then ambushed near Anahim Lake. Three packers were killed, along with the Tsilhqot’in wife of one of them. One of the attackers, a Tsilhqot’in named Chacatinea, was also killed.

Thus ended the “removal of settlers,” as Trudeau describes it. Or, to use MP McLeod’s words, doing “what many of us would have done.”

The last European casualty of the war — and the only one who could be considered a combatant — was my great-great-grandfather, Donald McLean.

A retired Hudson’s Bay Company chief trader, he was second in command of an expedition sent from Alexandria to look for Klatassine and his men. McLean was shot in the back while scouting one morning.

Put on trial and executed were Klatassine, a chief named Tellot, and four others named Tahpitt, Piell, Chessus and Ahan.

While resentment at intrusion by Europeans onto the Chilcotin Plateau was certainly a factor in this conflict, it wasn’t as simple as a defence of the Tsilhqot’ins’ land.

There were at least a couple of incidents of questionable treatment by the road-building crew (sometimes due to theft of their supplies), but by and large those were smoothed over, including an off-handed threat to bring smallpox upon the entire Tsilhqot’in nation.

The decimation of Interior Aboriginal peoples by smallpox was tragic, made worse by a couple of unscrupulous traders who resold infected blankets, but the epidemic was over before the road builders arrived.

There was no “biological warfare.” And while there were rumours of prostitution, they weren’t substantiated.

Plunder was certainly a motive — it was used extensively by Klatassine to talk others into joining him.

Klatassine was, in effect, a one-man avenger for this collection of perceived and genuine grievances. At its height, the “war” involved him and roughly 20 followers. It was not a general uprising; not “the Tsilhqot’in people.”

The ranking Tsilhqot’in chiefs, Anahim and Alexis, disavowed Klatassine’s actions and co-operated with the whites. Anahim talked two of the rebels into surrendering, while Alexis brought in Klatassine and several others.

Much is made of the “trickery” of Klatassine’s surrender to expedition leader William George Cox, as though it’s a greater wrong than killing unarmed people.

Klatassine, in fact, had no choice but surrender — without support from the Tsilhqot’in people in general, and his holdouts reduced to eating stolen horses, he agreed to go with Alexis into Cox’s camp, where he and several followers were arrested.

That incident has become symbolic of betrayal of the Chilcotin by government, just as the so-called war is symbolic of the many legitimate grievances of the Tsilhqot’in people since the time of colonization.

To complicate things with truth and nuances would be inconvenient.

In part, it becomes a cultural argument. Though Klatassine’s famous declaration, “We meant war, not murder,” sounds bizarre given the circumstances, stealth attacks and mutilations were common in clashes between First Nations enemies of the region at the time.

But when Europeans are killed, Europeans prefer their own justice, which doesn’t allow such things.

How do you reconcile that? Today, the definition of reconciliation appears to rest on apologies and exonerations.

If we’re to apologize and exonerate six men responsible for massacring innocents in the most brutal manner, even if we accept their leader’s rationalizations, shouldn’t we also recognize his victims?

They had names, too. They had families to support. They were simply working to make enough money to put food on the table. Though their presence might have been seen by some Tsilhqot’ins as representative of past wrongs, they didn’t see themselves as invaders.

True reconciliation is a two-way street. Colonization was racist and brutal and greedy. Let’s acknowledge that. Let’s accept that Klatassine and his followers had some good reasons to be offended.

But let’s also recognize that they committed great wrongs. They killed a lot of innocent people.

Let’s have apologies for that — then we can have a group hug.

Mel Rothenburger is a former Kamloops mayor, a descendant of Donald McLean and author of the book The Chilcotin War. In this article, he has used the current spelling in reference to the Tsilhqot’in Nation, and the old spelling in reference to the Chilcotin as a geographical area.

mrothenburger@armchairmayor.ca