



# What the Eagle Sees

INDIGENOUS STORIES OF REBELLION AND RENEWAL

ELDON YELLOWHORN & KATHY LOWINGER

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*To Jasper and Giovanni—EY*

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## Author's Note

*What the Eagle Sees* tells the story of what Indigenous people did when invaders arrived in our homelands. I don't try to tell the whole vast story, and in places I don't tell it in the order it happened. What you will find here are some of the places and people and events that have mattered to me in understanding my people's past.

A word about names. I use the word *Indigenous* to refer to the people I am writing about. In the past, names like Indian, Native, First Nations, and Aboriginal were in use. Where they are still being used, like Indian Relay, I have kept the names intact.

For hundreds of years after the Europeans' invasion, Mexico, the United States, and Canada did not exist, but I use those and other modern place names where they will make the text easier to understand. I say Turtle Island to refer to North America, as do many North American Indigenous people for whom, historically, the North American continent was the whole world; they adopted the name Turtle Island from the myth that their world was created on Turtle's back. Finally, I have tried to use individuals' Indigenous names whenever possible.



# EAGLE'S TALE



If we listen, every bird and animal has a story to tell us. Of all the birds and animals, Eagle tells the most important story of all: the story of life.

Eagle flies over everything, so he sees everything: he sees daylight and darkness, summer and winter, dry land and water, snowy mountains and cool valleys. He sees beauty and ugliness, war and peace. He soars so high that he is the go-between between humans and the Chief of the Sky World.

Eagle has the gift of flight and a freedom that we humans can only dream of. Maybe that's why we tell so many stories about him, stories in which Eagle is the king of birds, or a chief who talks with humans, or a sage advisor whose insights teach us life lessons.

Eagle inspires us to go where he goes, to reach beyond our grasp. That is why John Bennett Herrington of the Chickasaw Nation, the first Indigenous astronaut, took an eagle feather into space with him on the space shuttle *Endeavour* in 2002.



A Piikani eagle trap, or *ipsstsstsi*, in the Porcupine Hills, Alberta. Because eagles are such powerful medicine creatures, there are many restrictions against hunting or killing them. A person who eats even a bite of eagle meat is said to change into a monster. On the Great Plains, anybody who wanted an eagle feather had to pluck it from a live bird, so Indigenous peoples devised special eagle traps. In the Southeast, only hunters expert in eagle medicine could kill an eagle. In my own Piikani tradition, eagles were caught and killed only for traditional purposes.



Eagle's feathers are part light and part dark. The history in this book is like an eagle's feather. Past centuries have been full of terrible, tragic events for Indigenous people. That's the dark side of our story. The light, hopeful side is that against all odds we have survived. If you want to understand the past, keep Eagle's ways in mind. Take the long view, like Eagle does.

Artists carve images of Eagle on totem poles, talking sticks, and other kinds of art, including pottery and jewelry. Zuni carvers in the Southwest make stone Eagle amulets for protection or healing.

## **NEVER EAT AN EAGLE!**



The English fur trader, mapmaker, and explorer David Thompson (1770–1857) was traveling to Lake Athabasca with two Cree men. They had not eaten anything in several days. In desperation, Thompson shot and killed an eagle. One man refused to eat any of it because he had heard that anybody who eats an eagle will become a monster. He went hungry that night. Thompson and his other companion did not become monsters, but a few hours later they were racked with awful nausea and stomach cramps. The man who had gone without his dinner reminded his companions that there is a good reason nobody should eat an eagle.

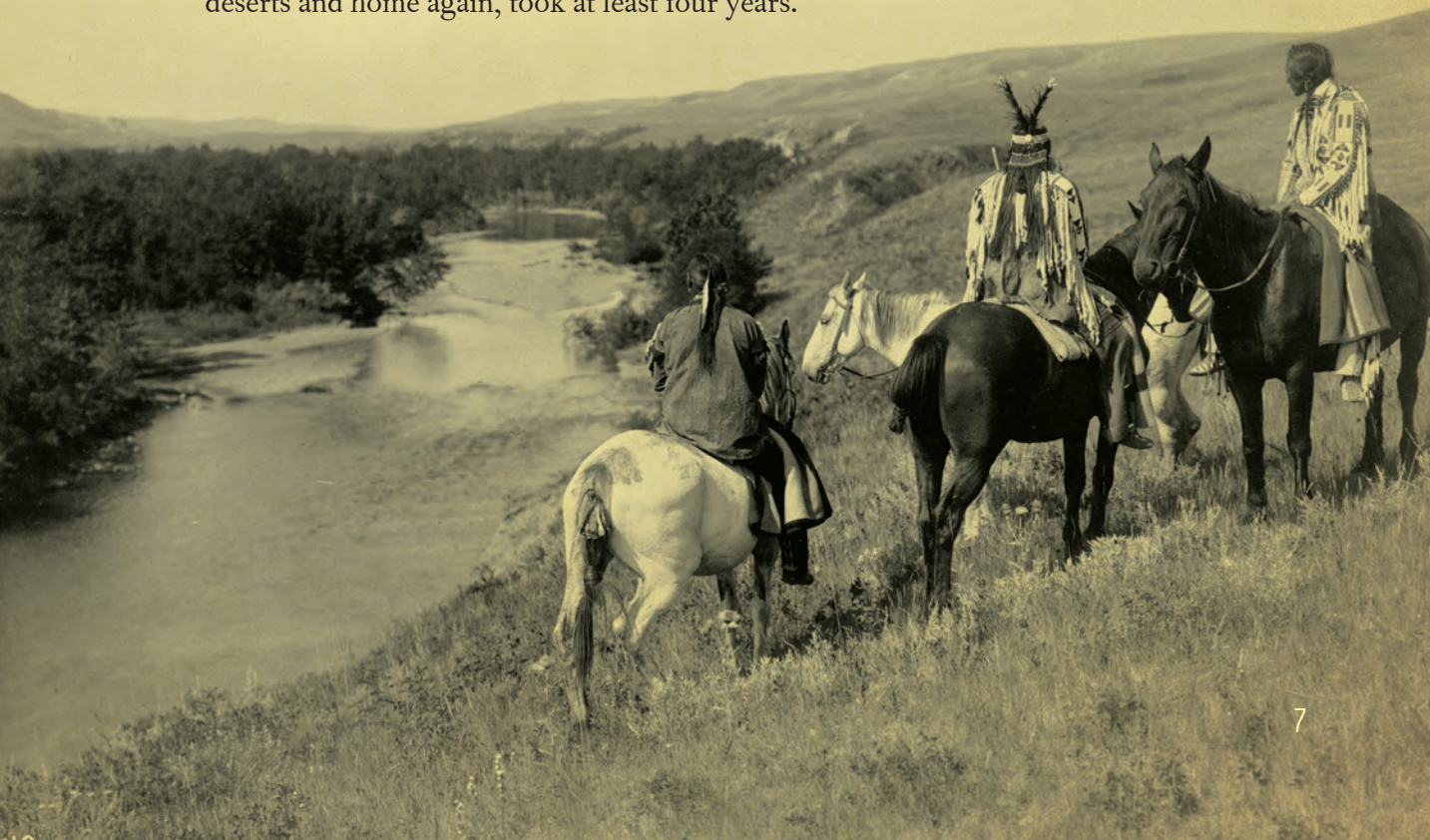
# THE STORY OF THE OLD NORTH TRAIL

*10,000 years ago to the present*

## SURVIVAL LESSONS

The Old North Trail is one of the oldest and longest roads in the world. A segment of the Old North Trail runs through the Piikani Nation where I grew up. It crosses the Oldman River just below Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump in southern Alberta. I have walked on the Old North Trail, jogged on it, and pedaled my mountain bike in its ruts.

My ancestors walked the trail in ancient times. Walking its 3,200 kilometers (2,000 miles), from the barren lands of the far north all the way to southern deserts and home again, took at least four years.





They followed physical landmarks, such as the Swan’s Bill just north of Banff, Alberta, and Chief Mountain in northern Montana, along the east side of the “Backbone of the World,” which we now call the Rocky Mountains. Some of them were on spiritual journeys. Others just longed to see the country or river or forest beyond the next hill.

Most of those who followed the Old North Trail were traders. The heavy sacks slung from tumplines—or straps—around their foreheads were packed with dried meat and tanned animal pelts to trade for razor-sharp tools made of a volcanic glass called obsidian or for precious shells to adorn themselves with.

The Old North Trail asked a lot of every traveler. You had to be nimble because it ran across stony riverbeds and around buttes so high you could barely see the top. You



An engraving from the 1700s showing Nootka Chief Maguinna, who controlled the fur trade in Nootka Sound, trading with Chief Callicum. Traded goods lie at their feet.





This Shawnee village on the banks of the Ohio river is one of the many different ways people lived on Turtle Island.

had to know how to read the wind and the sun and the stars. Your only map was the one in your head that you created from your own past travels or the stories you heard from other travelers. You had to know how to respect other people's ways, because you would be crossing the territory of one nation after another. You had to know how to communicate, even when you met somebody who spoke a different language.

Much of the Old North Trail is gone now, covered in grass or concrete, but trade routes like it once crisscrossed the continent. Indigenous people knew broad horizons—there were so many trade routes that it's possible every nation included at least one person who had seen either the Atlantic Ocean or the Pacific Ocean.

The trails of Turtle Island linked people who lived in many different ways. Some lived in cities. Others lived in tiny hamlets surrounded by farmland, or in homes they carried around with them. Some were ruled by royalty, while their neighbors might follow a chief and make decisions as a group. All of them had their own healers and artists, athletes and architects, hunters and farmers.

Despite all their differences, the many peoples had a lot in common. The Old North Trail and other trade routes like it taught my ancestors that understanding and knowing the land was vital to safe travels. Since the different groups

who used the trails often had no common spoken language, they devised a sign language that let them communicate and forge ties with one another. They understood the importance of learning from the Elders who had walked the trail before them.

I remember the Old North Trail when I think about the invasion of our land: the lessons we learned from the trail would help us survive the hard times to come.

## HOW DO WE KNOW?

### Follow That Obsidian!

the Ohio River. They knew that obsidian didn't occur naturally there; it must have come from over 1,600 kilometers (1,000 miles) away, in what is now Yellowstone National Park. How did the obsidian get from Yellowstone to the Ohio River? Did somebody travel west to get it, or did traders bring it with them when they traveled a thousand miles east? By looking at the distance between where such objects are found and where they originally came from, scientists can begin to unravel mysteries about how people traded and traveled long ago.

Archaeologists are detectives. The objects and cultural belongings they find are clues to mysteries of the past. For instance, obsidian is a volcanic glass that was very valuable because it can be shaped into razor-sharp tools. Archaeologists dug up pieces of obsidian in the two-thousand-year-old burial mound of a chieftain along



# FIRST COME THE VIKINGS

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**WE FIGHT THEM OFF**

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982 CE to ca. 1400 CE

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*We've found a land of fine resources,  
though we'll hardly enjoy much of them.*

—Thorvald, son of Erik the Red,  
Norse explorer, writing about events from 970 to 1030 CE

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# STANDING TOGETHER

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Slavery and disease almost wiped out the Indigenous peoples of North America. Imagining the destruction is almost impossible: 90 percent of the population died. Nation after nation disappeared. The survivors had to find ways to replace them. And they had to do it fast, if they were going to stand up against European invaders. The stories of Deganawidah the Peacemaker, Wahunsunacock, Tecumseh, and the Red Sticks tell us about just four of the very different confederacies that formed on Turtle Island.

*imagine*



Most of the people you love have died from a terrible sickness. If they survived the long days of fever, painful sores covered their bodies. Somehow you survived, but you are left with pockmarks. Still, you are more fortunate than those who lived but were left blinded.

Hardly anyone remembers the ways to keep the good spirits close and the bad spirits away. The few nobles and chiefs who are left have lost their powers to keep you safe. The wise Elders who knew the lineages and the history are all dead. The medicine men and women are gone. Hunters and farmers have died, and so have the old people and the children who depended on them for food. There are more dead people than living people left to bury them.

Despite the catastrophes, we survived.

## THE HAUDENOSAUNEE CONFEDERACY:

“THE WHOLE HOUSE”

*1451 to the present*

Indigenous peoples in the northeast came together to create one of the world’s oldest surviving confederacies. The Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy were joined by the Tuscarora in 1722. Since then, they have been called the Six Nations. The center of life for the people of the northeastern forests was their hodensoote, or longhouse. Haudenosaunee means “the whole house.”