

Book Review:
*Engraved on Our Nations:
Indigenous economic tenacity*

Dr. Robert Anderson

Wanda Wuttunee and Fred Wien (Eds.), (2024). *Engraved on Our Nations: Indigenous economic tenacity*. University of Manitoba Press, Winnipeg, MB., 342 pages, ISBN: 978-1-77284-064-3 (soft cover).

I have been asked to review “*Engraved on or Nations: Indigenous Economic Tenacity*,” edited by Wanda Wuttunee and Fred Wien. I am pleased to do so because it is edited by two giants of the Indigenous development effort to overcome the impacts of colonialism and modernization, the very struggle this book celebrates.

I first ‘met’ Wanda Wuttunee through her book “*In Business on Our Own*,” published in 1992. And that is not where she began her journey exploring Indigenous business and broader development issues. And this work has continued unabated. Fred Wien’s contributions are equally impressive, lighted by his service as the Deputy Director of Research at the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples from 1992 to 1996 where he led the research program on employment and economic development. I have listened and learned from both for many years and so have thousands of their students and fellow travellers on the tenacious struggle by Indigenous people for ‘development on their own terms.’ This open-access book makes it possible for many students and others to continue to do so as well, and not just from Fred and Wanda but from the wonderful group of stories and storytellers that they have brought together in this book.

In their preface Wanda and Fred state and seek to address the issue that, for several decades, academic literature, reports of inquiries, and media features have chronicled the disadvantaged and unequal position of Indigenous peoples in Canada. While often accurate in terms of substance, these narratives have contributed to a deficit perspective that is deeply discouraging to elected leaders, their administrations, and civil societies that on a daily basis engage in the struggle to improve community conditions.

They then to say that

this deficit perspective also ignores the tremendous resilience of Indigenous communities that have survived despite extreme hardship. It downplays the strengths of their political leadership as well as the tenacity and innovativeness of their business class, and the lessons that might emerge from a study of strength and resilience are submerged. Such a perspective fails to inform government policy and programs, neglects to give hope to those working on the front lines and misinforms students who are seeking better answers for the future.

In this book they describe and celebrate this ‘tenacity and innovativeness’ by curating an excellent collection of stories that the encouraging story about what has been done, what is being done and what can be accomplish going forward, because of heroic and tenacious struggle.

The stories making up the collection begin with an introduction written by David Newhouse, another giant in the field. David’s work in communities, organizations, and with his students has played an immensely positive role advancing Indigenous development over the past four decades. In his introductory chapter, David provides an overview of economic history and some of the specific realities that Indigenous Canadians faced in different historical periods. Looking at Indigenous economic history through the lens of tenacity, he underlines the importance of adapting to change, seeking to regain control, and bringing Indigenous perspectives to economic development strategy.

The remaining stories are presented in four sections, each with its own introduction that explains the theme of the section as well as how the included chapters elaborate on the theme. Part One focuses on strategic leadership, which is illustrated by Mary Beth Doucette and Fred Wien’s case study of Membertou First Nation and its impact well beyond reserve boundaries. Then there is Daniel Millette’s examination of the complexity of carrying out economic development involving multiple stakeholders, as in Tsawwassen First Nation, followed by Charlotte Bezamat-Mantes’s account of a First Nation pursuing Treaty Land Entitlements to develop an urban reserve in Saskatchewan.

The chapters in Part Two examine cases that are “culturally on point.” In this section, Isobel Findlay describes a fur trappers’ organization seeking to maintain a traditional way of making a living. Clifford Atleo reflects on whether capitalism can be Indigenousized, after which Judith Sayers discusses the debate around energy resource projects in the context of climate change and sustainable community development.

In Part Three, the chapters illustrate the importance of family and community connections to the success of Indigenous economic development projects. Chris Googoo, Catherine Martin, and Fred Wien pay tribute to entrepreneurs in the Atlantic region who have been awarded lifetime achievement awards by the Ulnooweg Development Group, celebrating their vision and tenacity in sustaining their businesses at a time when there were few programs available to support them. It highlights that family

and community support was vital to their success. Wanda Wuttunee describes a Métis electrical contracting business that was established and thrived despite the odds in the Northwest Territories. Wuttunee also gives an account of a community development project in the North End of Winnipeg that aimed to build skills among people from marginalized communities while also working toward strengthening Indigenous food security.

The final section, Part Four, features two projects that illustrate the theme of partnering for success. Jerry Asp's chapter features the Tahltan First Nation and the business partnerships it developed on the way to success in developing housing, mining, and hydropower projects. Wanda Wuttunee describes partnerships that developed between individual municipalities and First Nations in pursuit of joint projects, as supported by the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers (Cando) and the Canadian Federation of Municipalities.

The volume concludes with the editors reflecting on the themes and lessons that have emerged from the chapters, especially from the point of view of Indigenous tenacity in the economic realm.

For me, one of the most significant contributions of this collected work is the insight provided into the roles of politics, particularly the pursuit of Indigenous Rights (read as 'on own terms') and business. It is so much more complex and richer than 'keeping the politics out of business'!

A second significant contribution is the discussion across all stories about how to realize development 'on one's own terms', those terms being Indigenous. In this, I found David Newhouse's work on Red Capitalism and Clifford Alteo's "Can Capitalism be Indigenized" most fascinating. My question is, instead, 'Does Indigenous development need to be capitalist?' If capitalism means heavily individualistic, purely profit-oriented, nature as a 'resource', etc., then the answer is a resounding no! And this is because of the tenacious struggle by Indigenous people through politics and business so well illustrated in the stories in this collected work.

Finally, I like the threads intertwining the ideas of cocreation, two-eyed seeing, partnership, reconciliation and sustainability that emerge in various places and circumstances. Real hope for a reconciliation and better future for all.