

Sacred Promises and Good Relations



Silver medals were very much a part of the regalia – the ceremonial objects - of the Treaty ceremony. Treaty medals offered a lasting visual reminder to all the participants of their Treaty commitments and were offered to chiefs at the time of the Treaty signing.

One side of the medal featured a bust of Queen Victoria and the inscription “VICTORIA REGINA,” and on the reverse side, a stylized ‘Indian encampment at sunset, with an Indian leader in war costume and a British officer shaking hands’. The inscription on the reverse side reads: “INDIAN TREATY N^o. – / 187-.” The spaces were deliberately left blank and would be incised with the Treaty number and date at the appropriate time. ¹

The two men on the Treaty medal are shaking hands. A handshake between the Indian Commissioner and First Nations leaders took place following the signing of the Treaties. To the First Nations leaders, the significance of the handshake meant accepting the friendship extended from the Newcomers as well as accepting the negotiated terms of the Treaties. To the Newcomers, the handshake was extended to the First Nations leaders as a form of pledge and agreement to the important terms and new relationship that was formed as a result of the Treaties. ²

¹ <http://www.trcm.ca/about-us/trcm-medal/>

² Treaty Essential Learnings, TRCM, 2012

A common misunderstanding about Treaties is that they were simple land transactions, undertaken and finalized nearly 150 years ago. This isn't the full story. When Newcomers (referred to as the 'Crown') entered into Treaties, they entered into a covenant with First Nations people, which was made sacred by the smoking of the pipe. In doing so, it was understood that both parties were making an agreement, not only with one another, but also with the Creator. This is why First Nations call the Treaties a tripartite agreement. Treaties were – and remain – an enduring promise which could only be broken by the Creator. The Treaties were to last as long as “the sun shines, the grass grows, and the rivers flow.” Today, we—everyone—are responsible for honouring the Treaties.

If we look up the word 'Treaty' in a thesaurus or reference book we will find synonyms such as: agreement, settlement, pact, deal, and contract. No English word captures the nuances of the word Treaty as a sacred, tripartite agreement as well as a First Nations' language.

For example, in Cree kihci-asotamâtowin means “sacred promises to one another, the treaty sovereigns sacred undertakings”. The word miyo-wîcehtowin means “getting along well with others, good relations”. In Anishinaabeg agowidiwinan means “putting things together, bringing things together” and is the word used to describe Treaty.

Treaties are about sacred promises; becoming more knowledgeable about Treaty history as part of a shared Canadian history promises to bring about a greater understanding of our past as well as our future. Understanding the Treaty relationship is a beginning step for building “good relations”.

Take a look again at the Treaty medal. The ideas of an enduring promise, entered into as a peaceful, sacred agreement are evident in the medal's symbolism. Treaty medals remind us today that we have the opportunity to revisit and renew the Treaty relationship offering us all the chance to embrace mino-pimatisiwin, the “good life”.

Assignment:

Using what you have learned about Treaties, the Treaty relationship, and the symbolism depicted in Treaty medals, complete the following task as instructed.

What symbols on the Treaty medal represent **sacred promises**? What symbols on the Treaty medal represent **good relations**? Sketch or write the symbols in the circles below

Sacred Promises



Good Relations

