

This day in history: July 1, 1967

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Question

Is this a story of
despair or optimism?

On Canada's 100th birthday, Chief Dan George silenced a crowd of 32,000 with his 'Lament for Confederation' at Empire Stadium.

Photograph by: Glenn Baglo, Vancouver Sun file photo

On Canada's 100th birthday, Chief Dan George silenced a crowd of 32,000 with his "Lament for Confederation" at Empire Stadium. George's mournful speech began with, "Today, when you celebrate your hundred years, oh Canada, I am sad for all the Indian people throughout the land."

George — chief of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation, a Coast Salish band in North Vancouver — was also an author, poet and an Academy Award nominated actor. But above all, he was an activist and an influential speaker on the rights of native peoples of North America. Some of this activism may have stemmed from the fact that, at the age of five, George was placed in a residential school where his First Nations language and culture were prohibited. His "Lament for Confederation" — a scathing indictment of the appropriation of native territory by white colonists — was his most famous speech.

What follows is the complete text:

Lament for Confederation

How long have I known you, Oh Canada? A hundred years? Yes, a hundred years. And many, many seelanium more. And today, when you celebrate your hundred years, Oh Canada, I am sad for all the Indian people throughout the land.

For I have known you when your forests were mine; when they gave me my meat and my clothing. I have known you in your streams and rivers where your fish flashed and danced in the sun, where the waters said 'come, come and eat of my abundance.' I have known you in the freedom of the winds.

And my spirit, like the winds, once roamed your good lands.

But in the long hundred years since the white man came, I have seen my freedom disappear like the salmon going mysteriously out to sea. The white man's strange customs, which I could not understand, pressed down upon me until I could no longer breathe.

When I fought to protect my land and my home, I was called a savage. When I neither understood nor welcomed his way of life, I was called lazy. When I tried to rule my people, I was stripped of my authority.

My nation was ignored in your history textbooks - they were little more important in the history of Canada than the buffalo that ranged the plains. I was ridiculed in your plays and motion pictures, and when I drank your fire-water, I got drunk - very, very drunk. And I forgot.

Oh Canada, how can I celebrate with you this Centenary, this hundred years? Shall I thank you for the reserves that are left to me of my beautiful forests? For the canned fish of my rivers? For the loss of my pride and authority, even among my own people? For the lack of my will to fight back? No! I must forget what's past and gone.

Oh God in heaven! Give me back the courage of the olden chiefs. Let me wrestle with my surroundings. Let me again, as in the days of old, dominate my environment. Let me humbly accept this new culture and through it rise up and go on.

Oh God! Like the thunderbird of old I shall rise again out of the sea; I shall grab the instruments of the white man's success-his education, his skills- and with these new tools I shall build my race into the proudest segment of your society.

Before I follow the great chiefs who have gone before us, Oh Canada, I shall see these things come to pass. I shall see our young braves and our chiefs sitting in the houses of law and government, ruling and being ruled by the knowledge and freedoms of our great land.

So shall we shatter the barriers of our isolation. So shall the next hundred years be the greatest in the proud history of our tribes and nations.