

Sarah A. Nickel

Assembling Unity

Indigenous Politics, Gender, and
the Union of BC Indian Chiefs



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Figure 1 Delegates of the first Indian Chiefs of British Columbia conference, Kamloops, BC, 17–22 November 1969. | Photo courtesy of UBCIC

BEGINNINGS



ON A LATE NOVEMBER afternoon in 1969, approximately 150 delegates of the first Indian Chiefs of British Columbia conference gathered for a commemorative photo to mark the creation of a new pan-Indigenous political organization, the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs (UBCIC) (Figure 1). This was a moment that demanded to be captured, as it was the first time so many leaders and representatives from the almost two hundred First Nation bands in what is now called British Columbia had united for a common cause.¹ Of course, there had been earlier attempts at unity, including a number of pan-Indigenous organizations operating throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but settler colonial interference, as well as geographic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, prevented province-wide collaboration. This conference, hosted by the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc at the Kamloops Indian residential school, ushered in a new era of cooperation under the UBCIC, which quickly became a leading voice for Indigenous rights in twentieth-century British Columbia.

The above photograph embodies the rich history of this event. The conference's motto, "United we stand, divided we perish," which is visible on the banner in front of the delegates, was not only a poetic statement but

also a clear illustration of Indigenous realities in the late 1960s.² Attacks on Indigenous social, political, and economic autonomy were staple features in the Canadian settler state, and these took on intense new forms in the 1960s. Visible in the image is Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Chief Clarence Jules, the conference's official host, who, addressing delegates, said how proud he was that the chiefs had chosen Kamloops for this meeting. He insisted that this important gathering was "the first step in gaining recognition for our wishes, our aims, and our demands."³ Kamloops is known in Secwepemctsin as Tk'emlúps, which means "where the rivers meet," and the people, the Tk'emlúpsemc, are known as the "people of the confluence." That this conference took place in Kamloops, a traditional meeting place and trade route, and that the meetings were held at the Kamloops Indian residential school – a colonial institution co-opted by an Indigenous rights organization – was highly symbolic, and this meaning was not lost on the delegates.⁴

This photograph also embodies the narratives community members tell about the UBCIC. Between 2012 and 2015, I travelled around the province interviewing dozens of current and former members of the organization – some included in this picture. Almost everyone I spoke to referenced this first meeting and this image, drawing on their own memories or the stories they had heard. Some people told me how cold it was on that November day when delegates gathered for the picture.⁵ They talked about where they were standing; some shivered in front of the camera, and others, like Nlaka'pamux Lower Nicola Chief Don Moses, who helped organize the conference, stood behind the lens helping to squeeze everyone into the frame.⁶ Children such as Jeanette and Clarence "Manny" Jules, who attended the conference with their father, Chief Clarence Jules Sr., recalled chasing each other around as delegates organized themselves for the camera.⁷ Most people referenced the buzz of excitement that took over the gathering as delegates came to terms with the importance of achieving widespread political unity.⁸

The photographic image also symbolizes the political and logistical challenges of unity, as well as participants' unwavering dedication to it. British Columbia has a long history of Indigenous politics and resistance, but with almost two hundred distinct First Nations representing more than thirty language groups (each with different histories and political goals), gathering for a province-wide meeting to develop shared political goals was no small feat. Ongoing state oppression and a long history of attempts to achieve political unity prompted each of the delegates to make the often-difficult

trek to Kamloops in 1969. I heard stories from the coast of how community members piled into old cars with brown-bag lunches and sleeping bags, unsure of where they might stay or if they would have enough gas money to get to Kamloops.⁹ I also heard about one Gitksan chief from the northern town of Hazelton who was so intent on attending the conference that, with no other option, he hired a cab for the thousand-kilometre journey. The trip left him with a \$700 bill in an era before chiefs could expect their travel costs to be covered.¹⁰ To help offset this personal burden, delegates at the conference passed around the hat for a “little silver collection,” much like they did for others with a financial shortfall.¹¹ Delegates, then, had strong moral and material investments in the UBCIC’s success and the overall idea of pan-Indigenous unity. This photograph ultimately represents a wide swathe of experiences: some are visible in the image and others are not, but all are important in capturing the history of the UBCIC.

When these delegates formed the UBCIC in 1969, it was not the first example of pan-Indigenous cooperation or the first pan-Indigenous association to emerge. Indigenous communities had lengthy histories of cooperation through treaties. For instance, the Fish Lake Accord between the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc and the Syilx people of Sp’áxmen (Douglas Lake) settled a boundary dispute and long history of warfare between the communities and continues to be observed and reaffirmed today.¹² The principles within such agreements were central to the creation of pan-Indigenous political organizations in the twentieth century. The Allied Tribes of British Columbia, the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia, the British Columbia Indian Homemakers’ Association, the British Columbia Native Women’s Society, and the Indian Rights Association were just a few of the organizations that predated the UBCIC. But these regional, women’s, and nation-based bodies were limited in scope, longevity, and/or membership, largely because of continuing intra-community divisions and state resistance. A truly province-wide united front remained elusive, yet highly desired.

In mid-1969, pan-Indigenous unity had been given a boost when Pierre Trudeau’s Liberal government introduced its *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy*, better known as the White Paper. Under the banner of equality, the White Paper proposed to transfer the responsibilities for Indigenous peoples from the federal government to the provinces. To accomplish this, it would abolish the Indian Act, which governed the lives of First Nation peoples; terminate all treaties, which were sacred nation-to-nation agreements meant to continue in perpetuity; and eliminate the special

status and recognition of Canada's First Nation population. In British Columbia, where treaty making had been limited and Indigenous rights went unrecognized by the settler state, the White Paper meant that the federal government would permanently ignore the historical reality of colonial dispossession.¹³ This was unacceptable to Indigenous peoples in British Columbia (and indeed across the country), and they united in opposition.

Recognizing their structural limitations and inability to fully represent the broad provincial population, leaders from three existing associations operating in British Columbia – the North American Indian Brotherhood (NAIB), the British Columbia Indian Homemakers' Association (BCIHA), and the Southern Vancouver Island Tribal Federation (SVITF) – arranged for a chiefs' meeting to discuss province-wide unity.¹⁴ The 1969 Indian Chiefs of British Columbia conference drew leadership from at least 140 of the province's 192 First Nation bands.¹⁵ With 85 percent of the status Indian population represented, this meeting signified a level of pan-Indigenous cooperation Indigenous peoples had long been seeking.¹⁶ Organizers agreed that the UBCIC would not interfere with community autonomy or supersede existing organizations. Instead, it would act as a coordinating organization where chiefs could develop strong opposition to the White Paper as well as a unified stance on the unresolved British Columbia Indian land question and claims based on Indigenous title.

Considering the long historical push for pan-Indigenous unity and the unique conditions of mid-twentieth-century British Columbia, this book examines why Indigenous peoples sought unity to combat settler colonialism in the late twentieth century and, specifically, how the evolving and multifaceted concept of unity shaped the modern Indigenous political movement through the sometimes limited, hierarchical, and gender-biased political spaces offered by a provincial chiefs' organization. An old adage claims there is "strength in unity," and this has been the premise of many social movements and political organizations. But how true is this claim, really? How well does unity as a political concept and practice work for the political organization of marginalized groups? And in what ways might "unity" mask underlying inequities (such as those related to gender and status) that are then pushed aside under the emblem of the "greater good"? Who does "unity" really represent and benefit? Does the claim of universality actually serve only to reproduce deeply entrenched structures of inequality? Using the UBCIC as a case study, *Assembling Unity* wrestles with these questions and suggests that, even though unity (as envisioned and practised) by the

elite and male-dominated UBCIC could be exclusionary, the reality was far more complex, particularly as a wide variety of interest groups worked towards reshaping how unity was defined and performed within the wider movement. It would be easy to dismiss the UBCIC as a privileged male organization out of touch with its community, but that would ignore the nuances of power operating in Indigenous communities as well as their widespread belief in unity. Surprisingly, this chiefs' organization enabled more egalitarian political action than one might expect. This was entirely because individuals within the organization, as well as those outside it (including grassroots people and members of women's organizations), continually used "unity" as a tool to resist unequal elements of UBCIC directives.

Despite its focus on the UBCIC, this book is more than just a study of an organization. It explores the relationship between BC pan-Indigenous politics and global political channels and ideologies, placing the UBCIC within a local, regional, and international context. It firmly situates UBCIC negotiations of unity within the broader framework of Indigenous politics and resistance at a time when other organizations, as well as the burgeoning transnational Red Power movement, embraced Indigenous unity as a response to settler colonial oppression.

Two principal arguments complicate and contribute to existing narratives of BC Indigenous politics. First, unity was a long-standing and central goal for BC Indigenous peoples, one that not only preceded and extended beyond the UBCIC but was heavily negotiated between UBCIC members, grassroots constituents, and Indigenous women's organizations. Each had unique visions of what unity should look like and strategically used the concept to have their political goals realized within the context of the UBCIC. This process reveals much about pan-Indigenous politics in this era of liberal multiculturalism, Indigenous sovereignty, and global social movements.

Second, to maintain unity and resist settler political formations, the UBCIC and its critics and allies deployed political resistance, recognition, and refusal in highly strategic ways. Building on the works of Glen Coulthard and Audra Simpson, I use the term *recognition* to denote implicit and explicit acceptance of political authority, ideologies, and agendas within and outside of the UBCIC.¹⁷ I use the concept of *refusal* to highlight political resistance where individuals can register their opposition through political non-compliance and by enacting their own strategies. Examining the ways in which the UBCIC facilitated internal and external discussions about

political authority, representation, and strategy, this study reveals that recognition and refusal were negotiated not only between BC Indigenous peoples and settler-state actors but also within Indigenous communities and organizations. And these discussions often had a strong gendered dynamic, with Indigenous women consistently lobbying for representation. Exposing and embracing the complexities of how pan-Indigenous politics was negotiated adds important insights into how Indigenous politics works on the ground.

This work makes several core interventions into Canadian and Indigenous histories. By privileging Indigenous political theories and voices, it disrupts established assumptions that Indigenous peoples are not political but, rather, engage only in “activism” or reactive responses to settler colonial political forms, and, further, that the legitimacy and visibility of this “activism” continues to rely on recognition by the settler state. The foremost examples of this trend can be seen in existing discussions of the 1969 White Paper and the constitution debates of the early 1980s, which are falsely credited with, respectively, producing the modern Indigenous political movement and initiating calls for Indigenous sovereignty. According to Indigenous peoples, complex political systems and conceptions of sovereignty existed long before these developments. These myopic moments, then, collapse Indigenous politics – which has long drawn on historical socio-political bodies and generations of engagement with settler politics – into flashes of awareness and reaction that seem ungrounded and decontextualized, and therefore invalid. *Assembling Unity* corrects this practice.

This book also redefines the boundaries and expectations of what constitutes politics by unsettling dominant Western and patriarchal ideals. It presents a strong gendered disruption of Indigenous politics by firmly locating Indigenous women in the BC political movement. The UBCIC is, therefore, an ideal case study for understanding the evolution of political movements, concepts of unity and politics, and gendered political expressions.

Scholarly Interventions

Exploring connections between Canadian Indian policy, settler colonialism, global social movements, and Indigenous politics, this study draws on elements of two dominant historiographical trends – narrow community studies and broad political surveys – to demonstrate the strong intersections

between local, regional, national, and transnational political expressions. We know about the unique political activities and strategies of specific communities such as the St'át'imc, Nisga'a, and Syilx thanks to work by historians Joanne Drake-Terry, Daniel Raunet, and Peter Carstens.¹⁸ Their studies provide deep historical analyses of long-standing political engagements with neighbouring nations and settlers. Yet, within these works, links to larger political trends, including inter- and intra-tribal coalition and conflict, are somewhat lost. By contrast, broad political and pan-Indigenous surveys explore Indigenous interaction and the impact of Indigenous politics on Canadian political and economic structures. But these studies lack detailed ties to community dynamics and Indigenous identities.¹⁹ Instead, they provide wider lenses through which to understand Indigenous activism, highlighting far-reaching and long-standing political roots, and seeking to insert Indigenous politics into the dominant historical narrative.²⁰ For example, Paul Tennant's seminal work on Indigenous politics in British Columbia and Laurie Meijer Drees's study of the Indian Association of Alberta analyze provincial trends rather than individual community contexts or culturally specific political ideas.²¹ While focused on a provincial organization, *Assembling Unity* explores both broad and narrow political trends, using the concept of political unity as a guiding principle.

This work also firmly situates Indigenous politics within broader transnational networks, including sixties social movements and Red Power, showing how, for instance, Indigenous people in Canada were inspired by the fish-ins in Puget Sound, Washington State, which saw American Indians enacting their treaty-guaranteed right to fish; the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz by the pan-Indigenous "Indians of All Tribes"; and the American Indian Movement (AIM), which set up Canadian chapters in Penticton and Vancouver.²² Canadian and American activists moved across the border, taking their political ideologies with them and creating strong political partnerships. Indeed, young Canadian Indigenous activists such as Anna Mae Aquash travelled south to participate in AIM activities, including the 1973 Wounded Knee standoff on the Oglala Lakota reservation of Pine Ridge, South Dakota.²³ Meanwhile, American activists came north to lend support to events such as the 1974 Kenora takeover, which saw Kenora's Anicinabe Park occupied by the Ojibway Warrior Society; the 1974 Cache Creek blockade; and the 1975 occupation of the regional Department of Indian Affairs office in Vancouver, which involved local and international AIM members.²⁴ UBCIC members also worked together with the American

Indian Movement, the National Indian Brotherhood, and the Indian Association of Alberta (among others), and were influenced by the political theorizing and activism of individuals such as Martin Luther King Jr., Mohandas Gandhi, and Harold Cardinal.²⁵ These ideological and embodied cross-fertilizations shaped the political movement in British Columbia along global political contours and are fundamental elements of this narrative.

Theoretical Influences

Assembling Unity brings together critical Indigenous theory and Indigenous feminisms and uses archival and oral history methodologies to reveal the personal and community contexts informing both political engagements and expansive regional, national, and international political trends. To effectively privilege Indigenous understandings and practices of politics, this work begins with the premise that, while settler colonialism is designed to eliminate Indigenous peoples, cultures, and politics (as Patrick Wolfe convincingly argues), its success is not inevitable.²⁶ Alissa Macoun and Elizabeth Strakosch are correct in arguing that the settler colonial project remains unfinished, in large part due to Indigenous resistance and the refusal to accept settler sovereignty and political modalities.²⁷ This book likewise destabilizes assumptions of settler colonial theory and, using critical Indigenous theory, makes room within settler colonial analysis for resurgent Indigenous politics and decolonization. Focusing on a robust history of Indigenous politics and complex practices of resistance, refusal, and recognition, and centring Indigenous voices and histories, we can refocus our gaze away from what the settler project is trying to do, to see how it is failing in many respects and can continue to be disrupted.

Disruption takes many forms, including interrupting dominant Western knowledge systems with Indigenous theorizing, which includes acting politically, thinking, writing, singing, and dancing – all of which are visible in the UBCIC's history. Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith famously called for Indigenous peoples to implement their own systems of knowledge in order to destabilize oppressive Western research practices, and this work takes up this call.²⁸ Rejecting the tendency of Indigenous academics to equate theory and research with Western epistemologies and colonizing scholarship, and demonstrating the centrality and importance of theory for Indigenous peoples, I rely on Indigenous peoples' robust theoretical work to understand historical Indigenous politics. Indeed, UBCIC chiefs and

community members framed the Indigenous rights movement with Indigenous knowledge and political ideologies, and I not only situate Indigenous actors at the centre of my analysis, allowing them to tell their own histories on their own terms, but also privilege their theoretical frameworks about Indigenous politics, sovereignty, community, and decolonization.

This book also explores Indigenous women's political contributions, particularly within the male-dominated UBCIC environment. Despite a strong body of literature on Indigenous women's politics, we still know very little about how Indigenous women formed their political identities, developed political communities, and strategically leveraged their disadvantaged gender and racial positions to achieve political change. In recent years, scholars in the United States and Canada have re-examined Indigenous women's activities and discovered the deeply political nature of women's work in society, but women's politics remains historically decontextualized and either divorced from or folded into the broader Indigenous rights movement. Some important exceptions to this trend include Patricia Barkaskas's excellent master's thesis on the British Columbia Indian Homemakers' Association and its newspaper, *Indian Voice*.²⁹ Likewise, Jo-Anne Fiske's work reveals the political roles of Dakelh women in British Columbia, explaining how their participation in community work and voluntary associations relied on their roles and responsibilities as mothers.³⁰ Outside British Columbia, several important works highlight Indigenous women's political work, including Aroha Harris and Mary Jane Logan McCallum's analysis of eastern Canadian Indian Homemakers' Clubs and the Māori Women's Welfare League. These authors challenge assumptions about the conservative nature of early twentieth-century Indigenous women's organizations and find that, through their clubs, Indigenous women pursued their political and social objectives in ways that were consistent with their lived realities.³¹ Likewise, Kathryn Magee's article on Alberta Native Homemakers' Clubs, which suggests that these state-derived clubs served as vehicles of politicization for Indigenous women, also offers important insights.³² These analyses provide an important foundation in complicating histories of women's activism and Indigenous movements, but more work needs to be done.

Effectively integrating BC Indigenous women's experiences into this narrative demands understanding their unique struggles with colonialism and patriarchy. New Indigenous feminisms provide a robust framework for analyzing overlapping systems of racism and sexism to understand Indigenous women's socio-political realities.³³ Using an Indigenous feminist

lens that views women's Indigeneity as a multi-vocal site of strategic political power, *Assembling Unity* explores the political roles of Indigenous motherhood and homemakers' organizations and uses gender analysis to understand the highly masculine (and heteronormative) nature of Indigenous politics at this time. Unlike earlier expressions of Indigenous feminism that focused primarily on the fraught relationship between some articulations of mainstream feminism and Indigenous women, I use the term "new Indigenous feminisms" to refer to actions and perspectives that use strong feminist and gender analyses, and that critique patriarchy, white supremacy, and colonialism.³⁴

Methodological Frames

This research reflects a total of seven years of oral history work with individuals and communities around the province. It draws on interviews with dozens of current and former UBCIC members, as well as female Indigenous activists and activists' family members. Using semi-structured and open-ended interview techniques, I conducted interviews attuned to the ways in which political narratives and the interview space are negotiated across a variety of considerations (including social positions, memory, and political values).³⁵ My strategy for seeking interviews was to identify current and former UBCIC members and seek them out through my existing networks, recommendations from others, and the UBCIC. Personal references and limitations on my ability to travel widely meant that the majority of narrators came from central British Columbia and the Southwest Coast. For this reason, just as I recognize the challenges of representation inherent in oral interview work, I also acknowledge that this research is restricted in its ability to speak for activists in communities beyond the Southwest Coast and the Interior. Archival materials, however, provided insights into these and other gaps.

This book draws heavily on UBCIC archival records, including meeting minutes and conference materials, which expose the day-to-day operations of the organization and long-term trends. I used archival sources from the UBCIC's Resource Centre and Indigenous community archives, in addition to government records from the Department of Indian Affairs and the Department of the Secretary of State housed in provincial and national repositories. I also used a wide range of Indigenous newspapers operated by communities and organizations such as the UBCIC, the BC Indian

Homemakers' Association, the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia, and others. These records provide insight into the UBCIC from Indigenous perspectives as well as from settler colonial points of view. Because the UBCIC operated during a time when Indigenous politics became highly bureaucratized, I had access to a broad range of archival sources.

What Follows

This book does not represent a definitive history of the UBCIC or the individuals involved in it. In fact, the types of historical narratives produced through this book are decidedly complex and fragmented. As such, they seem to challenge the very possibility of constructing an intelligible and straightforward narrative. The UBCIC has operated since 1969 and has involved thousands of individuals across the province. Given the organization's longevity, the individual and nation-based membership of the UBCIC shifted, and elected chiefs and councillors changed over time, making identifying consistent protagonists difficult. This study embraces the complexities and contradictions inherent in the UBCIC and follows the general curvatures of the organization's history. Ultimately, this book will show how political unity was negotiated across a wide range of considerations.

Chapter 1 explores how Indigenous peoples sought unity and situates the creation of the UBCIC and new expressions of pan-Indigenous politics within the long history of politics in British Columbia. It counters the dominance of the White Paper – prevalent in most accounts of the modern Indigenous movement – which has tended to obscure important and established political networks, and it places the role of changing Indian policy in conversation with existing Indigenous political patterns. In this chapter, I argue that the UBCIC's formation reflected long-standing attempts at political unity – notably, concerted attempts to create a pan-Indigenous organization throughout the 1950s and 1960s. I also suggest that pan-Indigenous unity was ultimately conceptualized within a framework of band governance, which caused friction later on. Maintaining pan-Indigenous unity between 1969 and 1975 demanded that the UBCIC construct and emphasize its own political authority, and Chapter 2 examines this process. While the UBCIC's dominant concept of unity fostered inequalities between the union, its grassroots membership, and Indigenous women's organizations, I argue that groups who disagreed with the union's position used political interruptions and internal refusals to reconceptualize unity. From marginalized political

positions, these groups demanded the increased democratization of unity and more gender inclusivity, which in turn reshaped UBCIC mandates and practices.

By the early 1970s, the UBCIC's engagement with the Canadian state occurred primarily through government funding and increasing bureaucratization. Chapter 3 explains how the organization adapted its political strategies to incorporate a series of recognitions and refusals in order to propel its political agenda and preserve unity while working within state structures. This diplomatic strategy was not ultimately sustainable, however, and by 1975 the UBCIC and its constituents had reached a breaking point. Chapter 4 focuses on the UBCIC's decision in 1975 to reject government funding, which has long been viewed as a turning point for the organization. I suggest that the refusal of funding constituted a significant political interruption to the neoliberal state, yet this move also produced competing internal refusals among UBCIC constituents, many of whom disagreed with the organization's decision and its evolving conception of unity. Indigenous women's organizations were especially vocal against the UBCIC decision and framed their opposition in terms of gender inequality and the preservation of Indigenous communities. This rejection of funding was also accompanied by other radical manifestations of unity during the summer of 1975, notably direct action. Chapter 5 explores this increased radicalism, which resulted from the political decline of the UBCIC and of the Department of Indian Affairs' bureaucracy, new grassroots political channels, and political influences of global social movements. This radicalism demonstrated the power and flexibility of pan-Indigenous unity. Indeed, UBCIC constituents and community members adopted new political roles and ideologies and incorporated them within existing political frameworks. Although direct expressions of radicalism in the mid-1970s were ultimately short-lived, they caused the UBCIC and Indigenous activism in British Columbia to undergo a significant ideological shift. By the 1980s, conversations about Indigenous sovereignty dominated Indigenous organizations and communities. Chapter 6 places the aftermath of the funding decision and the continuing – albeit changing – discourse of unity in this context. It reveals how, at times, the UBCIC used the discourse of unity to define and pursue its own limited concept of male-dominated sovereignty within Canadian state political structures, but also how grassroots activists and Indigenous women continued to resist these limitations.

Assembling Unity traces the history of a movement built on a widely applicable, yet highly fraught and elusive concept, of political unity. Its stories are both unique and common. It examines the similar trajectories of the Indigenous rights movement across Canada and in the United States, and mirrors ideological conversations happening in the New Left, social movements, and other organizations combatting gender and racial inequalities. It offers insight into how movements grow and change over time; how cooperation and unity are negotiated; how hierarchy and power work, and how people shape those processes; and how resistance manifests both internally and externally. This study is the first to tell the history of pan-Indigenous unity in British Columbia as a story of political negotiation, gender differentials, and power. It traces this difficult and fraught work but eschews the temptation to evaluate political success in limited terms of “achieving” unity (a practical impossibility). Instead, it captures the political hope epitomized in Syilx Penticton Hereditary Chief Adam Eneas’s 1975 call to action: “My friends, this is unity and this is the way we should be doing it. Our old people are here with us. Let’s not talk anymore about the constitution and the white man’s laws and how we can fit into them. Let’s talk about what we are going to do now.”³⁶



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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Nickel, Sarah A., author

Assembling unity : Indigenous politics, gender, and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs / Sarah A. Nickel.

(Women & indigenous studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-3798-9 (hardcover). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3800-9 (PDF). –

ISBN 978-0-7748-3801-6 (EPUB). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3802-3 (Kindle)

1. Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs. 2. Native peoples – British Columbia – Politics and government. 3. Native women – British Columbia – Politics and government. 4. Indigenous peoples – British Columbia – Politics and government. 5. Indigenous women – British Columbia – Politics and government. I. Title. II. Series: Women and indigenous studies series

E78.B9N52 2019

323.11970711

C2018-902649-9

C2018-902650-2

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Set in Garamond by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.

Copy editor: Barbara Tessman

Proofreader: Helen Godolphin

Indexer: Judy Dunlop

Cover designer: George Kirkpatrick

Cover images: Delegates of the first Indian Chiefs of British Columbia conference, November 1969, photo courtesy of UBCIC

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpress.ca