



## The Chilcotin War – A Background

From a time before the founding of the Province of British Columbia, the Tsilhqot'in people have steadfastly protected their lands, culture, way of life including the need to protect the women and children from external threats – often at great sacrifice. The events of the Chilcotin War of 1864 exemplify the fortitude and the unwavering resistance that defines Tsilhqot'in identity to this very day.

When the Colony of British Columbia was established in 1858, the Tsilhqot'in people continued to govern and occupy their lands according to their own laws, without interference, and with minimal contact with Europeans. However, the Colonial government encouraged European settlement and opened lands in Tsilhqot'in territory for pre-emption by settlers without notice to the Tsilhqot'in or any efforts at diplomacy or treaty-making.

In 1861, settlers began to pursue plans for a road from Bute Inlet through Tsilhqot'in territory, to access the new Cariboo gold fields. At the same time, Tsilhqot'in relations with settlers became strained from the outset, as waves of smallpox decimated Tsilhqot'in populations (along with other First Nations along the coast and into the interior).

Between June of 1862 and January 1863, travellers estimated that over 70 percent of all Tsilhqot'in died of smallpox.

Some Tsilhqot'in initially worked on the road crew at Bute Inlet, but the unauthorized entry into Tsilhqot'in territory, without compensation, and numerous other offences by the road crew soon escalated the situation. Tsilhqot'in women and children were disrespected and abused, labourers were refused food, and demands by the Tsilhqot'in for payment for entry into Tsilhqot'in territory were denied.

In a pivotal encounter, a road-builder accused the Tsilhqot'in crew of theft, to which they answered, "you are in our country and you owe us bread." In response, the road-builder wrote down the names of the Tsilhqot'in in a book and threatened to eliminate them with smallpox.

In the wake of the smallpox epidemics only months before – decimating over two-thirds of the Tsilhqot'in population, this threat was taken very seriously. Tsilhqot'in declared war.

Customary to Tsilhqot'in culture the war group covered their faces in war paint, dancing and drumming in an all-night ceremony. At dawn on April 30, 1864, the group of Tsilhqot'in warriors, led by Lhats'as'in, attacked and killed most of the men comprising the main and advance camps of the road crew, effectively ending the incursion into Tsilhqot'in territory and the threats of smallpox and abuse. The Tsilhqot'in party suffered no casualties.

Over the ensuing days, the Tsilhqot'in warriors effectively removed all settlers from their lands, forcibly and by death if warnings went unheeded. By June 1864, the road project was abandoned and there was no settler activity between the Pacific Ocean and the Fraser River, a span of 400 km.

Meanwhile, Colonial authorities launched what the new Governor called "an invasion" of two militia groups, about 150 men. The two militias wandered without success through Tsilhqot'in territory, unable to engage or locate the Tsilhqot'in war parties in territory that was unknown to them but intimately known to the Tsilhqot'in.

Frustrated and desperate, the militia threatened the Tsilhqot'in with extermination, burned homes at Puntzi and Sutless (Nimpo Lake), destroyed fishing equipment and attempted to hinder food gathering. The militia's only casualty was a former H.B.C. trader regarded as a leader of those who disrespected the Tsilhqot'in. The Tsilhqot'in lured him into an ambush for execution.

On July 20<sup>th</sup>, unable to persuade any Tsilhqot'in to betray the war party and out of rations, the Governor made plans to withdraw in defeat. That afternoon, a Tsilhqot'in diplomatic party came to his camp. This, finally, was the first ever meeting between Tsilhqot'in and Colonial representatives.

In the ensuing negotiations, Colonial officials promised a peace accord under a flag of truce. However, when Lhats'as'in and seven others came unarmed for this discussion of peace on August 15, 1864, the Governor was not there. To their surprise they were shackled and tried for murder. Lhats'as'in's final comment about these trials was that "We meant war, not murder."

In the spring of 1865 the officials ambushed Ahan, the Tsilhqot'in headman from Sutless, as he was on his way to pay reparations for any harm to innocents as a result of the Chilcotin War.

When the Colony martyred five of "the Chilcotin Chiefs" on October 26, 1864 this was one of the largest mass executions in Canadian history. A mostly First Nations crowd of 250 people bore witness to the hangings. The sixth, Ahan, was hanged July 18, 1865.

Many of those who survived the smallpox epidemics or participated in "The Chilcotin War" went on to have long lives and large families with many of the Tsilhqot'in today counting them as ancestors.

Although an apology was issued by the Attorney General of British Columbia, Honourable Colin Gabelman, in 1993 for the wrongs done to the Tsilhqot'in before and after the Chilcotin War, the false promise of a truce by British Columbia weighed heavily on the Tsilhqot'in. In 1999, the Province unveiled a memorial plaque marking the gravesite of the five Tsilhqot'in chiefs who were executed in the immediate aftermath of the Chilcotin War. In part, it reads:

This commemorative plaque has been raised to honour those who lost their lives in defence of the territory and the traditional way of life of the Tsilhqot'in and to express

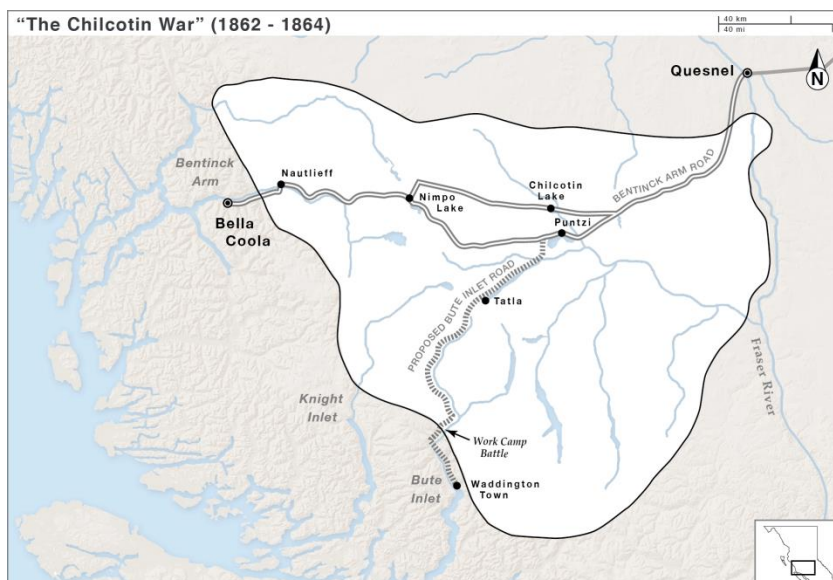
the inconsolable grief that has been collectively experienced at the injustice the Tsilhqot'in perceive was done to their chiefs.<sup>1</sup>

On October 23, 2014, the Premier of British Columbia formally redressed the injustice of the wrongful trial and hanging of the six Tsilhqot'in chiefs. The Chiefs were exonerated by the Province of British Columbia on this day.

For 154 years, the Tsilhqot'in people have honoured the Chiefs that lost their lives after the Chilcotin War for sacrificing everything in defence of their lands and their peoples. Such commitment and sacrifice continue to inspire the Tsilhqot'in leadership and communities, as they have fought relentlessly over the intervening 154 years to preserve their lands and culture in the face of ever-increasing threats from the outside world.

The day that the five Chiefs were hanged in Quesnel, October 26, is honoured as a national memorial day by the Tsilhqot'in people, known as Lhats'as'in Memorial day, formally established in 1999. This October 26, 2018, marks the 154 year commemoration of the hangings.

The Supreme Court of Canada's historic judgment in *Tsilhqot'in Nation* marks another landmark in the history of the Tsilhqot'in people and their continuing struggle for recognition as the true owners and caretakers of their Tsilhqot'in homeland. Decades after the events of the Chilcotin War, the Tsilhqot'in people continue to honour the past, and those that sacrificed so much to protect their way of life, as they chart the future for their nation.



Location of road construction during the Chilcotin War

<sup>1</sup> *Tsilhqot'in Nation v. British Columbia*, 2007 BCSC 1700, para. 331.