

“Telling stories – connecting cultures”

A report on a research and novel-writing trip to Norway, May to July 2016, supported by the Winston Churchill McNeish Writer’s Fellowship.



Carolyn Gillum, 2016

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Contents

CONTENTS	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
INTRODUCTION	6
FELLOWSHIP	6
PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES	6
METHODOLOGY	6
RESEARCH	6
WRITING	6
BACKGROUND: THE ALTA CONFLICT	7
CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ALTA CONFLICT	11
FINDINGS AND LEARNINGS	12
OUTCOMES	13
CONCLUSION	15
APPENDICES	17
APPENDIX 1: MAP AND TRAVEL DETAILS	17
APPENDIX 2: LIST OF INTERVIEWS AND SITE VISITS	18
APPENDIX 3: KEY INTERVIEWS AND SITE VISITS (INCLUDING PHOTOS)	19
PER FLATBERG, OSLO	19
MÁRET SÁRÁ, KÁRÁŠJOHKA	24
SÁMI PARLIAMENT AND SÁPMI PARK, KÁRÁŠJOHKA	27
BERNT SUHR & TORE BONGO, ALTA	31
ARNE JOHANSEN IJÁS, GUOVDAGEAIDNU	33
POINT ZERO – ALTA DAM AND POWER STATION, STILLA	35
ALTA MUSEUM, ALTA	37

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Cover page photo: *Greeting Máret Sára, Sámi activist and author, at her home in May 2016.*

Executive Summary

One of the values of literature is that it has a humanising effect, it allows us to understand and see ourselves, and those around us, in new ways. I wanted to undertake this research because I wanted to write a novel with this impact. What I didn't anticipate was that the writing journey would have such a deeply humanising effect on me.

My fellowship project was a combined research and writing trip to Norway in support of my novel, a literary crime story set in a fictional country based on contemporary Norway. My focus was two-fold, to research the Alta Dam controversy, which forms the background to the plot, and to spend several weeks in the country completing my first draft while immersed in the Norwegian culture and landscape.

My novel aims to explore the social effects of prejudice and the subconscious assumptions we make about others based on their ethnicity, gender, culture and religion. A historical dam controversy involving indigenous peoples, environmental activists and the Norwegian state, provided a rich setting to explore the intersections of these issues.

During my trip, I heard many fascinating and moving stories about the complexities and nuances of the Alta Conflict: about collaboration, dissent, threats and state-sanctioned violence. I was particularly affected by the stories of resistance and hard-won battles of the indigenous Sámi. Their experience of colonial violence led me to reflect deeply on my own privilege and complicity in a system that maintains it; to ask what it means to be Pākehā in Aotearoa / New Zealand, what it means to call myself an anti-racist ally and an intersectional feminist.

Everything I learned during and after the trip has fed into my book. I believe I've created an authentic world in my novel, not only from a cultural and environmental perspective, but also through endowing my characters with realistic motivations, prejudices, fears and hopes. I've achieved this in part because the stories I heard and read provided great insight into the deep internal conflicts that exist within individuals, between families and within communities – and the consequences when such conflicts simmer for decades. I understood how many ways violence can be inflicted, and about what it means to be silenced.

I've also written about what it means to speak. Because the heart of my fellowship was dialogue; strangers meeting across a table, sharing food, laughter and stories across language and culture.

People often ask me why I was drawn to the north, to Norway, to the Sámi; these people and places, events that happened so far from The Land of the Long White Cloud. I think it has something to do with stories.

Whether it is through conversations, or books or films, it is our *whakawhanauatanga*, our *whakapapa*, the stories we tell about ourselves, our history, our genealogies, why we are here and what we value, through which we form connections with others. We feel compassion for each other. We laugh at things we recognise in our own life. We are inspired, encouraged and comforted. We see situations in new light, and reflect on other points of view. Because stories can give you knowledge about the world and your predicament, and give you weapons, give you armour.¹

In an era of increasing authoritarianism in the West, of rising hate-crimes and the vilification of people based on their ethnicity, gender and religion, it is ever more critical to connect across cultures, to recognise our shared humanity, to read and write books that provide knowledge and armour, to build a united resistance to violence, oppression and hate.

¹ Neil Gaiman, "Neil Gaiman lecture in full: Reading and obligation", <https://readingagency.org.uk/news/blog/neil-gaiman-lecture-in-full.html>, (15 October 2013).

Introduction

Fellowship

Winston Churchill McNeish Writer's Fellowship

Purpose and objectives

My fellowship project was a combined research and writing trip to Norway in support of my novel, a literary crime story set in a fictional country based on contemporary Norway. My focus was two-fold, to research the Alta Dam controversy, which forms the background to the plot, and to spend several weeks in Norway completing my first draft while immersed in the landscape and culture.

Methodology

Research

I undertook face-to-face interviews with both Sámi and environmental activists involved in protesting the dam build, and by email with those I could not meet in person. I also interviewed a Sámi professor at the Sámi University College and visited the Gáldu – Resource Centre for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. I was taken on private tours of the Sámediggi (Sámi Parliament), Sámi heritage museum (Sápmi Park) and the Nature Museum at Stabburnes on northern coast of the Sámi heartlands. I undertook site visits the Alta River and canyon, to Point Zero, where the protesters were arrested, and to the Alta Dam and power station, and the village of Máze. I also met with the curator of the Alta Museum who gave me a tour of their exhibitions, which includes one of the Alta Conflict, and showed me through photos and artefacts held in the archives.

Writing

The second part of my journey was focused on consolidating my research and writing my manuscript in the city of Bergen and the Lofoten Islands of Arctic Norway. Both locations are inspiration for the settings in my novel.

See Appendices for maps, photographs and details of my interviews and site visits.

Background: The Alta Conflict

In the 1960s the Norwegian government drew up plans to dam the Alta River in the Arctic Circle, and build a hydroelectric power plant. This was to be the last in a decades-long state-funded hydropower building programme, similar to that undertaken during the Muldoon era in Aotearoa / New Zealand. The project would have flooded the indigenous Sami village of Máze (Masi), one of the few remaining Sami cultural centres in Norway, and destroyed their reindeer-herding lands. The reindeer need food that grows on the coast to survive; if they cannot be herded from their winter homelands to their summer grazing grounds they die. The Alta River, and Alta Canyon it flows through, is also an area of extraordinary biodiversity and outstanding natural beauty, and home to some of the most valuable wild salmon stocks in the world.



The Alta River flowing through the Alta Canyon, the largest in Europe. For perspective, there is a hotel on one of the islands in the river. Photo by Drew Robertson.

Protests began in the early seventies, but reached a climax in 1979-81. The protestors were mainly the indigenous Sami people, and Norwegian environmentalists (conservationists and scientists) who along with other Sámi, formed *Folkeaksjonen* (The People's Movement). Over

time, an increasingly broad spectrum of Norwegian society opposed the dam, including fisher-folk, farmers, intellectuals and journalists. The protests made international news when a group of Sami staged a hunger strike outside the Norwegian parliament in Oslo; the story of their plight, and history of oppression, caused international outrage.

At the height of the crisis, approximately 600 police were shipped in to break up the protest in one of the largest police operations in modern Norwegian history. Over 800 people were arrested when police broke up the blockade created by protesters who had built ice-walls across the road and chained themselves together in -22 degrees Celsius temperatures in the ever-dark of the polar winter.

The dam was eventually built, but on a reduced scale and without flooding Máze. The international coverage of the dam and the protests not only increased global awareness of the plight of the Sami, but led directly to the establishment of the Sámediggi (the Sami Parliament) and Sámi University, as well as improved environmental regulations to ensure river preservation, particularly with respect to dam-building. These days, the Norwegian state, and the companies involved in international hydroelectric engineering projects, position themselves as experts in indigenous mediation.



The protestors behind their ice walls blockading the road to the dam site. Photos in this image are from Máret Sára's personal collection. Photo by Drew Robertson.



The Alta Dam, in May 2016. The river is still part frozen from winter. Photo by Drew Robertson.

Continuing significance of the Alta Conflict

The Norwegian Office for Contemporary Art has named 2017 as “a year of indigenous art and thought” and will hold a series of events in Norway, closing with the exhibition ‘*Let the River Flow. The Sovereign Will and the Making of a New Worldliness*’ in October 2017.

This exhibition will trace the recent history of Sámi artistic activism across Sápmi – the Sámi homelands in northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia – beginning with the radical Máze Sami Artists Group, who were involved in the Alta protests (see p.25 for a photo of artist Synnøve Persen during the hunger strike).²

These art events will also highlight another 2017 celebration – the 100th Sámi Jubilee, which commenced in Tråante (South Sami for Trondheim), on 6 February. This day marked exactly one hundred years since the first congress of Sami people was held in the town. Máret Sára, one of my interviewees, launched her latest book there: ‘Samer I Russland’ (Sámi in Russia).

² “Highlights of 2017: a year of indigenous art and thought”, Office for Contemporary Art, Norway, <https://www.oca.no/news/9385/highlights-of-2017-a-year-of-indigenous-art-and-thought> , (27 February 2017)

Findings and Learnings

I embarked on this journey to understand the motivations and experiences of the people involved in a historical dam conflict. I wanted to understand the differences between indigenous and environmentalist attitudes, their hopes and fears, the nuances and contradictions of protest and how it affects families, friends and townsfolk. I also wanted to learn about Norwegian and Sámi cultures, the natural environment and what it means to live in a climate that ranges from minus thirty-five to thirty-five degrees, in an annual cycle of ever-night and ever-light.

I learned all these things.

And more.

I learned that non-violent protests are often infiltrated by those with violent intent. I learned that protecting what you love can risk your family's safety, and your own. I learned that standing up for what you believe in can destroy your livelihood, and that even hardened activists are devastated when they lose. I learned that once fined as a traitor to the state, you can be redefined as a medal-worthy hero.

I learned that when small-town police break-up a protest, they do so with respect for family, friends and townsfolk, but when the state dictates it must crush an 'uprising' they recruit out-of-town officers and condone their violence. I learned that when hundreds of police from southern Norway descend on an isolated northern town, there will be secret love affairs and unplanned children. I learned that after a while a place gets tired of being defined by a conflict.

I saw what it does to a people to have their language forbidden, their lands stolen, their children abused, their history rewritten, their culture mocked and dismissed. I learned Sámi can still be spat on in the streets of twenty-first century Oslo. I learned what it means to grow up in a place once occupied by Nazis who razed it to the ground on their retreat; to grow up in a country that was desperately poor, and is now inconceivably wealthy. I learned how it feels to live in a place so resource-rich that environmental destruction is a permanent threat to your survival.

I know that reindeer fur is soft and tough and that Rudolph was female because only females have antlers in December. I know that a dessert made of cheese and cloudberry is one of the most delicious things you can eat. I know that a frozen lake looks like magic, that the tundra is vast, desolate and alive, and that there are mosquitos so big machines are required to suck them out of the sky. I know how it feels to sit by a fire at midnight and watch the sunset merge into sunrise.

I know the Arctic Circle can be sweltering and freezing. I know that few birds sing in spring. I know the crabs are huge, the lynx are rare and that the arctic hare changes colour by the season. I know how a turf house is built.

I know you should dunk dried reindeer in coffee, although your long-black will taste like meat. I know how bowls are fashioned from burls, how to tell a *lavvu* from a *ghoati*, where the Sámi goddesses reside, and that one of the Sámi languages was eventually spoken by only two people, both of whom are now dead.

I witnessed how conversation and openness unite us. How empathy and curiosity and kindness go further than you think when it comes to survival and resistance. How hospitality and friendship can transcend a transactional life. I learned that sometimes gifts are truly gifts, not a complex form of social exchange. I learned that the Sámi never had a word for war.

I learned about state-sanctioned violence, cultural genocide, environmental destruction, about sacrifice and loss. I learned about living in endless darkness and night-less light, I learned about survival, determination, resilience and that “all” is never completely lost. I learned that you do not have to be grateful for scraps.

I learned about rising from the ashes.

Outcomes

I was deeply affected by the activists’ stories of sustained resistance and the consequences, but particularly the Sámi struggle for survival, their alliances with other indigenous peoples’ around the world and the recognition and rights they won after the Alta Conflict.

All the activists' stories reminded of the importance of inviting everyone to the table, of unity, of listening, especially to those who don't look or sound like ourselves.

This led to a deep reflection on my own privilege and my complicity in a system that maintains it; what it means to be Pākehā in Aotearoa / New Zealand, to call myself an anti-racist ally. I have learned to continually seek to educate myself about racism – not wait for 'teaching moments' by those who've suffered a lifetime of oppression. I have made it my business to deepen my understanding not only of Sámi culture, but of Māori culture and grievances. Since returning, I have taken courses in Te Reo and Rongoā (Māori medicine), actively sought opportunities to hear Māori speak, to read their history, to learn their stories and understand the violence of colonisation.

A lifelong feminist, I've also taken steps to understand and explore more deeply the voices of black, indigenous, LGBTQI women. I understand the threat I feel in an era of Trump and Brexit is what these women have experienced their whole lives. I dug out my university texts and re-read Homi Bhabha and Kimberlé Crenshaw, Audre Lorde and bell hooks. I attended *Same Same but Different*, the LGBTQI writers' festival, read novels recommended by queer friends to better understand the complexities of sexuality. I bought books recommended by my Sámi interviewees, including writings by indigenous women about misogyny and colonisation and homophobia, and how to fight them all.

Everything I've learnt during and after the trip has fed into my book. I believe I've not only created an authentic world in my novel, but also endowed my characters with realistic motivations, fears and hopes. I have queer characters, characters with white supremacist beliefs, indigenous characters defending their land and their people, indigenous characters who disagree with this approach, those who feel others have been 'given too much', characters who don't understand their own privilege, those who do, and how the status quo is maintained. I've achieved this in part because the trip provided great insight into the internal conflicts and contradictions that exist within individuals, between families and among indigenous communities – and the consequences when such conflicts simmer for decades. I've considered the various ways violence can be inflicted, and about what it means to be silenced.

I've also written about what it means to speak. Because the heart of my fellowship was dialogue; strangers meeting across a table, sharing food, laughter and stories across language and culture. I've continued learning Norwegian, and made efforts to retain the few words of Northern Sámi Máret Sára taught me, because a language teaches you so much about a culture and a country. When we only speak in my language, it is also a form of silencing.

When I returned, I went to hear the writer, professor and activist, Ngahuia te Awekotuku speak. She mentioned that in the process of being gifted her name, she discovered her great-great-grandfather was a Norwegian Sámi who came to Aotearoa / New Zealand as a scout in the 1850s. I was struck again how in our search for ourselves we discover the extraordinary distances across which we are connected, and how often we uncover stories of continuous migration and shared histories.

Like many indigenous people, the Sámi believe humans are part of nature and not the rulers of it. Māori also believe we are *kaitiaki*, the guardians. I returned home with the knowledge that through my writing and my own actions, I want to be a better guardian, of the environment, of our diverse cultures, of our shared humanity.

Conclusion

One of the values of literature is that it has a humanising effect, it allows us to understand and see ourselves, and those around us, in new ways. I wanted to undertake this research because I wanted to write a novel with this impact. What I didn't anticipate was that the writing journey would have such a deeply humanising effect on me.

People often ask why I was drawn to the north, to Norway, to the Sámi; these people and places and events that happened so far from The Land of the Long White Cloud. I don't know. But I think it might have something to do with stories.

Whether it is through conversation, books or films, it is our *whakawhanauatanga*, our *whakapapa*, the stories we tell about ourselves, our life, our genealogies, why we are here and what we value, by which we form connections with others. We feel compassion for each other. We laugh at things we recognise in our own life. We are inspired, encouraged and

comforted. We see situations in new light, and reflect on other viewpoints. Stories can give you knowledge about the world and your predicament, give you weapons, give you armour.³

In an era of increasing authoritarianism in the West, of rising hate-crimes and the vilification of people based on their ethnicity, gender and religion, it is ever more critical to connect across cultures, to recognise our shared humanity, to read and write books that provide knowledge and armour, to build a united resistance to violence, oppression and hate.

³ Neil Gaiman, “Neil Gaiman lecture in full: Reading and obligation”, <https://readingagency.org.uk/news/blog/neil-gaiman-lecture-in-full.html>, (15 October 2013).

Appendices

Appendix 1: Map and travel details

I began my journey in May 2016, in the Arctic Circle – in Norway’s most northern city, Tromsø. I hired a car and travelled through Sámpí, the Sámi heartlands. I stayed in Alta, visited the Alta Dam, canyon and power station at nearby Stilla, as well as the village of Máze (Masi in Norwegian). I drove north through the Porsanger region to Stabburnes, circled back to Kárašjohka (Karásjok) and Guovdageaidnu (Kautokeino), before returning to Tromsø.

At the start of July 2016, I flew to Oslo to continue my interviews and research in the capital. I then took the train onto Bergen to write, before returning to the Arctic Circle – the Lofoten Islands – where I consolidated my research and worked on my manuscript.

Below is a map of my fellowship journey:



Appendix 2: List of interviews and site visits

I met and spoke with many people on this journey. The interviewees listed below are those with whom I had extensive conversations and whose input contributed significantly to my learnings about the Alta Conflict, Sámi life, Norwegian history and natural environment.

In-person interviews – May 2016

- Bernt Suhr – environmental activist, Alta
- Tore Bongo – environmental / Sámi activist, Alta
- Anne Pettersen – Alta Museum curator, Alta
- Svein Ingebrigtsen – Stabburnes Museum Nature Guide, Stabburnes
- Máret Sára – Sámi activist and author, Kárášjohka
- Arne Johansen Ijäs – Lecturer, Sámi University College, Guovdageaidnu
- Per Flatberg – Environmental activist, Oslo (July 2016)

Email interviews / correspondence – March-May 2016

1. Øystein Dalland – Professor and environmental activist
2. Bjarne Store-Jakobsen – Sámi activist and leader of the hunger-strike

Site visits – May 2016

- Alta River, Alta
- Alta Canyon, dam and power station, Stilla
- Máze village
- WWII German barracks and Russian prisoners of war ruins, Porsanger
- Nature Museum, Stabburnes
- Sámediggi (Sami Parliament), Kárášjohka
- Sapmi Park (Sámi heritage museum), Kárášjohka
- Sami University College campus, Guovdageaidnu
- Gáldu – Resource Centre for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Govdageaidnu
- Stortinget (Norwegian Parliament), Oslo

Site visits – July-August 2016

- Oslo city
- Bergen city
- Lofoten Islands, Troms

Appendix 3: Key interviews and Site Visits (including photos)

Per Flatberg, Oslo

Although he was one of my last interviewees, I begin this section with Per Flatberg, because he was instrumental in connecting me to the many incredible activists I met on my journey. During the Alta Conflict, Per was Information Officer for Folkeaksjonen (The People's Movement). He forged alliances with other groups, including the Sámi activists, and made the public case against the Alta Dam. After the conflict, he was arrested and fined as an enemy of the state, but in an about turn, several years later received the King's Medal for his achievements.



Per and me at the Norges Naturvernforbund offices in Oslo, July 2016 . Photo by Drew Robertson.

Per was described by one of his colleagues as ‘a very inspiring man’, and I can testify to this. The former Secretary General of the Norges Naturvernforbund, Per brought not only great passion to the movement, but also his public relations and negotiation expertise. He emphasised the importance of cooperation with other groups, and leadership in developing a powerful opposition.

Per became involved in efforts to protect the Alta River and canyon in the mid-1970s. He was appointed Secretary General of Naturvernforbund in 1978 and it was the first case he was given. However, in 1980 he left this role, and his job at Oslo University, as he felt passionately about participating in civil disobedience activities in Alta to protect the river.

Per lived in Alta during 1981 with his son, who attended school there as well as many of the demonstrations. Per had notable political connections and met several times with Gro Harlem Brundtland, who was to become the Norwegian Prime Minister during the conflict.

The Oslo newspaper 'Dagbladet' broadly supported the protesters (photo below). This page from January 1981 illustrates two of the Sami hunger strikers, Mikkel Eira and Nils Gaup, with the headline 'Sámi have a good friend at the castle.' The Norwegian parliament – Stortinget, is known as The Castle. Many people came onto the street to support the Sámi activists hunger-striking, and Per reported seeing old women brandishing umbrellas at the police.



Photo by Drew Robertson.

In 1979, over 6,500 people came from twenty different countries to attend the Protest Festival, at Detsika, near Alta, held on land owned by a supporter of the activist movement. The Protest

Festival offered workshops and information about the Alta region, the dam and the canyon, and crucially about engaging in non-violent action. Per took one of these workshops. Posters advertising this in Swedish, German and English as well as Norwegian are in the Alta Museum.



Above and over,,: brochures from the Protest Festival listing courses in non-violent action. Photo by Drew Robertson.

Activists were also the target of hostility. When Per lived in Alta the police had him under surveillance and listened in on his phone calls. It was deemed too dangerous for him to go out alone at night due to heightened tensions in the town. One evening, he was having dinner at a hotel with a journalist and a man strode in and attempted to assault him at the table. At the height of the conflict, his wife in Oslo also began to receive threatening telephone calls.

Per participated in the second hunger-strike with the Sámi. It was a final effort to stop the build. However, they were forced to make a dramatic escape to Stockholm, Sweden during the night to avoid the force-feeding planned by the Norwegian government. Following this there was a temporary stoppage to work on the road to the dam, which helped end the hunger strike. When work started again, the protestors moved to Stilla and dug their ice barricades into the snow to prevent any more work on the road that would lead to the dam. This was the action that resulted

in the arrival of hundreds of police from southern cities to arrest the protestors. Per was one of those arrested and briefly imprisoned.

In March 1983, two years after they were arrested at Stilla – Per and three others, including Folkeaksjonen leader Alfred Nilsen and Tore Bongo (another interviewee), were sentenced in court as ‘agitators’ against the state. The government used a sleeping paragraph of the law to prosecute them – the first time it had been used since World War II. Per was fined 15,000 kronor (NZ \$2,500) and received a suspended 60-day sentence. The sentencing was widely denounced and the defendants received much public support. They are pictured (below) on the front page of Nordlys newspaper in Finnmark, in a ‘sea of flowers’. To this day he is proud to be considered an ‘Oppvigler’, especially as he has such prominent company as former prime minister Einar Gerhardsen, who was sentenced for agitation in the 1930s.



Photo by Drew Robertson.

However, despite being declared an enemy of the state in 1983, just five years later Per was awarded the Kings Medal of Merit in gold “for extraordinary achievements of importance to the nation and society” (photo over page).



Per also kindly organised a lunch with some of the staff from Naturvernforbund (below) where I discussed the fellowship, my book and our trip to Finnmark. (*Photos by Drew Robertson*).



Máret Sárá, Kárášjohka

In the town of Kárášjohka, in the Sámi heartland of arctic Norway, I had the honour of meeting the incredible Máret Sárá. A lifelong activist, Máret grew up in a nomadic reindeer-herding family at a time when Sámi language and culture were virtually erased under the Norwegian assimilation policy. Along with other interviewees, Bernt Suhr and Tore Bongo, she chained herself to the barricades during the Alta Conflict. She was arrested several times and fined 3000NOK (\$NZ500). Per Flatberg described her as “a true activist”.



Máret Sárá (and me), in her garden in Kárášjohka, Norway. The birch trunks in the background are the framework for her lavvu, which is similar to a teepee. Photo by Drew Robertson.

Máret patiently taught me many things about Sámi culture and history, including basic Sámi phrases and the correct way to pronounce and spell the Sámi names for the towns in the region. Many of these were given similar sounding, but meaningless Norwegian names as part of the assimilation process. Kárášjohka means ‘little bowl on the river’, as the town is in a small valley surrounded by mountains, on a river. But the Norwegian name for the town – Karasjok – has no meaning.

Máret illustrated (below) how a goahti is organised – a goahti is a family tent, similar to a lavvu, but larger and more elongated. She also illustrates where the three goddesses reside: in the fire, where the parents sleep, and by the door. Máret's necklace are also images of the goddesses. Sarakka is the goddess of fertility, love, sexuality, pregnancy and childbirth. (The modern Sámi women's organization, The Sarahkka, of which Máret is part, is named in her honour.) Sámi believe embryos are girls, and Juoksáhkka is the goddess that changes the embryo from a girl to a boy if the parents make a sacrifice to her. Uksáhkka is the protector of home.



Photo by Drew Robertson.

Máret also had an incredible collection photos of the Alta conflict. After she was arrested she represented herself in court and refused to speak Norwegian, making her case only in the Sámi language. When the translator misrepresented her, she continually repeated herself until he agreed to translate exactly what she had said.

In 1979, Máret and fellow activists wrote, produced and sold *Charta 79*, a newspaper to inform the public in Oslo about Sámi issues (photo over). This was while the Sámi were first hunger-striking outside parliament, and the state assimilation policies had been so effective that few Norwegians even knew of the Sámi let alone the threats they faced. The hunger-strike was key for Sámi gaining national and international support. Print runs were up to 30,000.



Discussing Charta 79. Máret kindly gave me a copy. Photo by Drew Robertson.



Máret with the hunger-strikers in Oslo. The woman in glasses is artist Synnøve Persen who was part of the famous 'Máze-group' who wanted to change the ethnographic view of Sámi artists. Photo by Drew Robertson.

Máret has also been instrumental in (re)building relationships with Sámi people whose homelands include northern regions of not only Norway, but Sweden, Finland and Russia. Indigenous peoples around the world began working in solidarity during the 1970s/80s. After the Chernobyl disaster poisoned berries the Sámi reindeer ate, concerned Alaskans Máret had met arranged to send berries to sustain the Sámi via the Air Force (photo below). However, the Norwegian authorities refused to allow the berries to be offloaded.



Photo by Drew Robertson.

Sámi Parliament and Sápmi Park, Kárášjohka

Máret also took us on a wonderful tour of places of Sámi importance in Kárášjohka. Several towns in the Finnmark region are predominantly Sámi, and the only places in Norway where the Sámi language(s) are the primary spoken language. We often saw people wearing Sámi dress for their day-to-day business and the designs reflect the area the person is from. Of course, the choice of whether, and when, to wear Sámi clothing is political. Even now, Sámi report being abused when wearing their clothing, as happened to a friend of Máret's in Oslo in 2016.

One of the major outcomes of the Alta Conflict was the legal recognition of the Sámi as the indigenous people of Norway and the implementation of rights to protect their culture. This

precipitated the process that led to the establishment of the Sámediggi (Sámi Parliament) in 1989 (photo below), which is one of the most stunning buildings I've ever seen.

Parliament sits in the wooden lavvu-inspired structure in the centre, while the library and the offices populate the building that surrounds it. The parliament can address all issues considered to impact Sámi people, although powers are limited, and decisions are not necessarily considered by the Norwegian Parliament.



The Sámediggi. Photo by Drew Robertson.

Máret organised a private tour of the Sámediggi for us, including viewing some of the Sámi art collection, much of which had been hidden for decades to avoid destruction.

Investment into the preservation and promotion of Sámi culture, including Sámi languages, has also led to the establishment of the beautiful library. Máret has contributed by writing over thirty books, most in Sámi language(s), and we found many on the shelves. For the 100-year Sámi jubilee in February 2017, Máret launched her latest book with co-author Nina Afanasjeva: “Samer in Russia 1917-2017”, which tells the story of Sámi who live on the Kola Peninsula in Russia, and were closed off from their cousins in Scandinavia by the Iron Curtain.



Above: on tour in the Sámediggi. Below: Máret in the room where MPs sit. (Photos by Drew Robertson).



Below is a photo of one of the many stunning works of art in the Sámediggi. Most have political meaning or history and this is perhaps the most famous – a painting of the Alta Conflict. It depicts the Sámi and Norwegian protestors and their lavvu in the foreground – ‘La elva leve’ means ‘Let the river live’. The Alta River flows through the canyon toward Storinget, the Norwegian Parliament in Oslo, which is painted as a dam. Beyond it, the Norwegian flags sink into the floodwaters.



Photo by Drew Robertson.

Máret also took us on a personal tour, explaining the many items in the heritage ‘Sápmi Park’ – which includes examples of the ghoati, lavvu, and turf structures she grew up in, as well as several reindeer!

Bernt Suhr & Tore Bongo, Alta

Environmental activist, Bernt Suhr and his daughter, Linda (who translated for us) kindly invited me to meet with them at their house in Alta. Sámi activist Tore Bongo, also joined us.



Bernt talking me through the events of the Alta Conflict, documented in a book of photos that was published later. On the table in the foreground is Tore's dried reindeer. Photo by Drew Robertson.

Bernt and Tore were both part of Folkeaksjonen (The People's Movement), of which Per Flatberg was Information Officer. Bernt's wife and young children also participated in the many street demonstrations in Alta from 1979-81. When Bernt was arrested, the police stormed their house, which Bernt's wife described as terrifying (she was home alone with their baby).

Bernt's key interest was in the preservation of the wild salmon fish stocks. Fishing is not only a significant business in the Finnmark region, but access to the pristine waters of the river and fish that live there, is considered a right of all people who live near the Alta River. Each year a lottery is undertaken to allocate fishing licences and areas of the river. Townsfolk are glued to their radios in anticipation of their numbers being drawn.

Tore was one of the leaders of the protest camp and his name and photo appear in many artefacts in the exhibition and collection at Alta Museum (see last page).



Tore's family are from Guovdageaidnu and this is reflected in the stunning colours and design of his tunic. Photo by Drew Robertson.

Tore and Bernt are friends from childhood and distantly related. Both were devastated when the dam build went ahead, although they hold different opinions about the outcome for Sámi. Like Máret (and most Sámi I met), Tore believes that the rights gained do not go far enough to protect their culture and lands, and feels his people still struggle to be treated fairly and recover from decades of oppression and suffering under the assimilation policies that outlawed their languages and culture. By comparison, Bernt, and many Norwegians I met, hold the view that Sámi have attained a lot and should be more pragmatic about progress. These opposing perspectives echo those I have heard expressed by Māori and Pākehā in Aotearoa / New Zealand, and between the first peoples of Canada and the United States, and the white population.

Bernt and Tore also explained many aspects of northern Norwegian life, especially their engagement with the outdoors hunting and fishing, and their belief all people have the right to spend time in nature. When the dam went ahead, Bernt offered his expertise in an effort to ensure the least possible effect on the salmon.

Arne Johansen Ijäs, Guovdageaidnu

I met Arne Johansen Ijäs, a ‘Sea Sami’ in Guovdageaidnu (Kautokeino), where he lectures in journalism at the Sami University College, which was established as a result of the Alta Conflict.



Arne and me. Photo by Drew Robertson.

The Sámi University College was established in 1989. Its role is to preserve and promote the Sámi languages, culture, skills and history, and to support Sámi equality. This campus houses several institutions including the Sámi University College, the Sámi Archives, International Centre for Reindeer Husbandry and the International Resource Centre on Indigenous Rights.

In Norway today, the majority of those who identify as Sámi live on the coast and are known ‘Sea Sámi’ or ‘Coastal Sámi’. Arne is from Lyngen Fjord (near Tromsø). He didn't speak Sámi growing up, although he understood it as his parents and grandparents spoke it at home. Today he teaches in the Northern Sámi language and research includes the representation of Sámi in the media (they are almost always presented as in conflict – either with the state, Norwegians, or each other). He also teaches on the recently established Master's degree in indigenous journalism offered by the university, which addresses issues such as this.



The Diehtosiida Campus is a striking building on the hill overlooking Guovdageaidnu. (Photos by Drew Robertson).



Arne gave me a fantastic book about working with indigenous knowledges. Left, are books Máret also gifted me.

Point Zero – Alta Dam and Power Station, Stilla

We visited the site of the protest camp at Stilla and the Alta Dam with local guide Elina, whose godfather is Alfred Nilsson, former leader of Folkesaksjonen.

Today, a barrier is all that marks ‘Point Zero’ – the site of the biggest act of civil disobedience in Norwegian history (photo below). This is where the protestors build their ice barricades to try to prevent the building of the road, which would eventually lead to the dam. It’s still a controversial place – locked eighty-percent of the year and routinely vandalised.



Point Zero, May 2016. Photo by Drew Robertson.

Per was adamant about Folkeaksjonen policy of non-violent protest. Although, of course, violent factions did attempt to infiltrate the group. They were successfully rooted out and sent home (the IRA attempted infiltration at one point), but some individuals took matters into their own hands. The bridge in the photo below was blown up by a man who lost his eye and arm in the incident. He fled Norway on a false passport and sought asylum with a Native American Indian tribe, returning once the terrorism charges were dropped. The bridge is named after him today.



(Below) Sami hunger-strikers outside the Norwegian parliament. The sign reads “We hunger strike”. It is part of the small exhibition of the conflict at the Dam.

Photos by Drew Robertson.



Alta Museum, Alta

I had a personal tour of the Alta Museum, with curator Anne Pettersen. The museum's most famous exhibits are the numerous 7000-year-old rock carvings made by ancient reindeer-herders who lived in the bay (Alta is at the head of a fjord). These are still in-situ outside the museum.

Inside there is an exhibition of the conflict that bears the town's name, including many photos of the protestors resisting arrest in their snow barricades, and original documents including the rules of the protest camp (Anne translates in the photo below). Protestors came from around Norway, but many were unprepared for the harsh climate and endless darkness of the far north. They had to be equipped with decent winter clothing and sleeping gear.



Anne translates the rules of the 1981 Stilla protest camp at Point Zero. Photo by Drew Robertson.

Anne also took me through a huge archived collection of photographs of the conflict, donated after Folkesaksjonen disestablished in the mid-eighties (see photos over page). The museum still remembers this historic protest by hosting an annual event where school children role play the events of the conflict. It's very popular!