



**Goethe Institut-Toronto
Joe Big George Collection Report**

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“What happens behind prison walls is a reflection of the health and vitality of Canadian Society” (Sapers, 2013).

Introduction

The Manitoba Library Association Prison Libraries Committee (PLC) is a group of volunteer librarians, library workers, academics, writers, and community members that provides collections, programming, and library awareness for people who are incarcerated in Manitoba. This report will contextualize the PLC’s newest initiative, the Joe Big George Collection; framing the state of information access in Manitoba and Canadian Prisons, other factors contributing to information needs and rights, such as institutionalized systemic racism and the impacts of colonization, and providing an overview of the PLC’s history, programs, and services supporting information access to people incarcerated in Manitoba’s provincial prisons.

Prisons and Information Access

Reading and access to information for prisoners is an important and rare connection to the outside world; it is also a basic right (Prison Libraries Network, 2016). Incarcerated people face numerous challenges in their ability to access, interact with, create, and share information (Huot, 2021). As stated by The Canadian Federation of Library Association’s *Prison Libraries Network: Right To Read Statement*, upon incarceration, prisoners do not “...relinquish the rights and freedoms guaranteed to them under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*” (Prison Libraries Network, 2016). However, people’s access to information is heavily shaped by the context of imprisonment. Unfortunately, limited funds, staffing, and a lack of commitment or prioritization leave most prisoners in provincial prisons with little to no access to books and information. The consistent inequity and lack of information access experienced by prisoners can be described as institutionalized information poverty or information marginalization; in which the need for information is often caused by the prison itself (Rabina, Drabinski & Paradise,

2019). This marginalization of information is enforced both intentionally and indirectly by prisons (Huot, 2021). Most prisoners face numerous barriers to accessing information, including limited access to print materials, limited to no internet access, as well as available information being subject to institutional policies and arbitrary staff censorship.

In Canada, federal prisons are mandated to provide library services, though these are often understaffed and underfunded without quality collections. In the province of Manitoba, as in many others, provincial prisons are not held accountable to upholding standards for information access and library services. Often, information is only accessible through educators, Elders, and community partner groups, including librarians, that work with and in the prisons.

Information access is essential for a multitude of reasons and it is frequently recognized that the experience of imprisonment increases the need for access to information, freedoms “...such as those of conscience and religion, thought, belief, opinion, and expression hav(ing) a heightened importance behind bars” (Prison Libraries Network, 2016). Incarcerated people may need information for countless reasons. Reading simply for leisure is an important connection to wellness and the outside world. People may seek culture, spirituality, the arts, and health through books. People may desire information for educational, professional development, and legal purposes, to support their plans for re-entry, or to navigate the justice and carceral system. Prisoners have the right to actively engage in literacy “...to develop knowledge and potential, to achieve goals, and to participate fully in wider society ” (Prison Libraries Network, 2016).

Why Libraries and Librarians?

“Prison libraries play a fundamental role in guaranteeing rights, not only by providing inmates with access to information about their legal rights as incarcerated persons, but also by providing the tools necessary to exercise these rights” (Prison Libraries Network, 2016).

At the heart of a good approach to information literacy in prison is the “recognition of people’s full humanity, their individuality, autonomy and potential, and acceptance of them as members of the larger society” (Zinger, 2020). Prison libraries and services can help minimize the dehumanization of incarcerated people, providing moments of connection, dialogue, and creation. Libraries are the ideal method of supporting access to information and supporting information literacy. The core values of librarianship include intellectual freedom, access to information for all, balanced with other factors like social responsibility, diversity, collection development guidelines, and patron input (American Library Association, 2019). As stated in the Prison Libraries Network’s *The Right to Read*, the Canadian Federation of Library Association’s *Position Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries* “...asserts that Canadians’ right to access information is essential to be able to advance themselves through literacy, lifelong learning, social engagement, and cultural enrichment”(Prison Libraries Network, 2016). Numerous standards and guidelines, such as the IFLA *Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners* (2023), the *American Library Association’s Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated and Detained* (2024), and *Correctional Service Canada’s National Guide for Institutional Libraries* (2012), demonstrate the quality and level of library services that should be available. Providing access to a prison library is also considered a minimum human rights requirement as mandated by *The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)*, a document that outlines the minimum standard of treatment for prisoners (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015). Several of these documents advocate for the importance of library materials, spaces, services, programs, and library staff. These standards are overwhelmingly unmet by Canadian prisons. Since the 1980s there have also been two major reports about prison libraries in Canada. Both the Nason (1981) and Marwick (1984) reports shared recommendations for improvement of library and school services, but all recommendations have been ignored.

As previously discussed, access to information and library services is typically provided not by the prisons themselves, but by partner organizations, such as the PLC. Libraries, librarians, and library workers inherently support mitigating barriers to access to information for so many of our community members; this includes those who are incarcerated. It is valuable that librarians and library workers be involved in the work of providing library services and collections in prisons. Prisons may attempt to provide varied and inconsistent access to information and books themselves, often with no consultation with professional librarians and little understanding of information rights or best practices of prison libraries. Furthermore, library services are sometimes viewed by prisons and their staff as a privilege for good behaviour rather than as a human right or a meaningful and mandatory service or program. The best practices that the profession has developed for prison libraries are invaluable, however, prison policy and procedures are often at odds with the core values of librarianship, and prison libraries must function within the carceral system by compromising and continually advocating for incarcerated patrons.

Beyond the right to accessing information and books, the exchange of books and participation in library programs and services can be a humanizing experience for incarcerated people. In addition to accessing information, library programs and services that support the sharing and creation of information can provide opportunities for information resiliency, in the otherwise constrained information environment of the prison (Huot, 2021). Treating prisoners with dignity and humanity while helping to fulfill their information rights can help minimize the harm and damage of incarceration.

Systemic Racism, Colonization, and the Carceral System

Who is imprisoned in Canada is a direct contextual reflection of larger societal conditions including poverty, disability, systemic racism, and colonization. Canadian prisons are active participants in social and political colonialism (Prison Libraries Network, 2016), as reflected by

the policing and legal systems that fill them. Canada's history of state-sanctioned surveillance, criminalization, and punishment of Black, Indigenous, and other racialized, marginalized, and impoverished peoples continues to fill prisons at disproportionate rates (Maynard, 2022). In Canada, 71% of prisoners are in remand, which means they have not yet been found guilty and are being held in custody awaiting court appearance (Statistics Canada, 2023a). As argued by the John Howard Society (2023), this is a cause for concern as those people who are proven innocent, which is about 35% of remand prisoners, serve time that cannot be returned to them. In Manitoba's provincial prisons, about 76% of adult prisoners and 87% of youth prisoners are Indigenous (Statistics Canada, 2023a). In 2021 Indigenous people were incarcerated at a rate 8.9 times higher than non-Indigenous peoples. In women's prisons, this ratio tends to be much higher, with a National average of provincial prisons having Indigenous women incarcerated at a rate 15.4 times higher than non-Indigenous women (Statistics Canada, 2023b). Statistics from Canadian adult federal prisons also show an overrepresentation of Black people making up 9% of the incarcerated population but only 4% of Canada's adult population (Department of Justice Canada, 2022); provincial statistics show an overrepresentation at similar rates. People with intellectual or developmental disabilities are also over-represented in Canadian federal prisons, with a ratio of 2.1% making up the incarcerated population versus 0.9% in the non-incarcerated population. They are found to be more vulnerable during and after incarceration than prisoners who do not have intellectual or developmental disabilities (Matheson, F., et. al, 2022). It is essential that access to information and books in prisons be reflective of the diverse inmate population.

Manitoba Library Association Prison Libraries Committee

Manitoba Prison Library Need

Individuals who are imprisoned in Manitoba are an underserved segment of the population who lack adequate access to books, information, and library services. Approximately 12,000 incarcerated Manitobans, 80% of whom identify as Indigenous, are not only without mandated and organized access to books and materials for recreational and educational reading, but also to materials about Indigenous culture, histories, and identity, or to legal information.

Vision and Mission

Our guiding principle is that access to information is a human right. The right does not and should not disappear upon incarceration, as imprisonment does not mean total deprivation of rights. *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* still guarantees all Canadians the right to freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression. We believe prison libraries and literacy play an important role in peoples' reintegration into communities. Thoughtful programming and access to meaningful and relevant reading materials can help improve individuals' quality of life both inside and outside of correctional institutions.

History

In 2012, the Manitoba Library Association started a Prison Libraries Committee (PLC) to volunteer in the provincial prison system to mitigate the lack of libraries and library services in Manitoba's provincial prisons. 11 years later, the PLC is run by close to 30 volunteers from around the province and provides varying levels of library services to every provincial institution in Manitoba. These correctional institutions are:

- Winnipeg Remand Centre

- Headingley Correctional Centre for Men (HCC)
- Women's Correctional Centre (WCC)
- Milner Ridge Correctional Centre (MRCC)
- Brandon Correctional Centre (BCC)
- The Pas Correctional Centre
- Manitoba Youth Centre (MYC)

Programs and Services

Activities of the PLC include:

- Collecting, curating, and organizing books for the prisons
- Operating library services and programming inside the prisons, such as book clubs, and library book exchanges
- Arranging special guests for author talks, writing workshops, and songwriter visits
- Publishing a chapbook by the women inside WCC
- Providing an Email Reference Service to respond to specific information needs
- Create library awareness for incarcerated Manitobans to inform on the resources and tools of the library for when they are released
- Committing to work together with partner sites and organizations towards the mutual goal of providing incarcerated and reintegrating individuals with relevant reading material and information
- Acting with respect to both incarcerated Manitobans and workers in the justice system
- Advocating for the greatest access to reading materials and information possible within the environments of individual correctional institutions
- Public presentations and media interviews to highlight the need for books and libraries inside Canada's prisons

Joe Big George Collection

“Prison libraries have a responsibility to provide access to resources on Indigenous histories, cultures, and languages, to Indigenous writers and authors, and to resources that speak to the impacts and related healing processes of colonialism” (Prison Libraries Network, 2016).

There exists an ongoing colonial history and systemic racism within institutions like the library and prisons. How Indigenous ways of Knowing, culture, and histories can exist within them must be considered. Libraries can, in small ways, support reconciliation work by providing access to books by and about Indigenous peoples; fictional books, non-fiction, books about Indigenous beading, cooking, art, history, language, rights, movements, and more.

Though the PLC has long had a focus on providing access to a wide variety of Indigenous books to its partner prisons, in 2022 the committee launched a new Indigenous book collection named in memory of Elder Joe Big George who worked and spent time with incarcerated Manitobans. Joe believed in the value of books by Indigenous authors and about Indigenous histories and cultures as critical to help folks know more about their own identities. He was himself a voracious reader and spoke about how books created space for him to learn and grow. Before passing away in April of 2023, Joe had begun curating a collection of books for Milner Ridge Correctional Centre (Vadeboncoeur, 2023). The PLC is continuing this work by building a collection separated from its general one, that is cataloged, circulating, and dedicated to Joe’s legacy. This collection was ignited by Joe’s partner Joanna White who continues to shape the project’s scope. Additional work such as featuring the collection through a website and the cataloging of the books is underway; as well as plans to potentially create videos interviewing formerly incarcerated people as a way of sharing the impact that books, and in particular Indigenous books, have on being incarcerated. Joanna continues to be involved in shaping the direction of the Joe Big George Collection.

Legal Information Project

Incarcerated community members in Manitoba provincial prisons also have serious unmet legal information needs. To help meet some of those legal information needs, PLC has partnered with the Manitoba Law Library on a new project called the *Prison Libraries Initiative*. This project has thus far conducted research, written literature reviews, and started relationship-building with Manitoba Justice, and with community stakeholders, like the University of Manitoba - Robson Hall Rights Clinic, Access to Justice Advisory Network, Community Legal Education Association of Manitoba (CLEA) and more.

This Initiative addresses a significant opportunity to encourage and promote legal education and the development of law libraries to a population that has long been neglected, and yet whose legal needs are great. As discussed, prison libraries are often overlooked as an integral part of Corrections, and prisons are not set up to bring information to incarcerated people. As a result, information poverty along with low literacy levels do nothing to help incarcerated individuals deal with the complexities of an information-driven society, nor does it offer access to the necessary information, legal and otherwise, needed to understand and solve problems. By setting up libraries in provincial correctional institutions with legal resources and programming, this new *Initiative* can work to ensure that incarcerated Manitobans' rights and freedoms are not relinquished in terms of their legal needs.

The *Initiative* is currently building legal collections of books and resources, working to provide legal information programming, advocating for legislative reform, and creating content for legal resources in accessible and relevant formats to those incarcerated in Manitoba's six correctional institutions.

The *Initiative* is partially guided by the idea that librarians and libraries have a role to play in contributing to social justice in our communities: to create and humanize a space where

everyday knowledge, experiences, and literacies are valued. This means to ensure incarcerated people feel included in and knowledgeable about the justice process - to feel heard and valued.

Future Planning

The problem of over-incarceration generally, and of Indigenous and racialized people specifically, is not going away any time soon. To this end, the work of the Manitoba Library Association PLC is not going away either. Future plans include increasing our capacity to offer more writing and art workshops for the both the women's and men's prisons in Headingley, Manitoba to help create and publish chapbooks of the creative works (art, poetry, essays etc) by those incarcerated.

Newly established relationships with the Manitoba Youth Centre have revealed more needs specific to a younger demographic. Again, no real library exists at the youth center, and the institution has expressed the need for not only a library, but also for library volunteers to assist in-person with book choices, and readers advisory for the youth.

More regular programming has also been identified as a big need in Manitoba prisons, and the PLC is working with local Indigenous writers, creators, and artists to share their gifts with the incarcerated community. The PLC, alongside with partners from the Joe Big George project have plans to create promotional materials to not only highlight the need for books and libraries inside prisons, but also to share testimonials and insights of those impacted by books, especially those on Indigenous subject matters.

Impact of Goethe Institut-Toronto Funding

The Goethe Institut-Toronto's financial contribution of \$3000 CAD to the Joe Big George Collection funds resulted in the purchasing of 134 new books by and about Indigenous people. Books reflect a range of reading levels including adult, young adult, and children's books with titles spanning a wide range of fiction such as novels, graphic novels, poetry, and non-fiction

such as language learning, dictionaries, history, culture beading, cooking, 2slgbtqia+, and traditional plant use. The collection development was supported through consultation with Lyle Ford, a Metis Librarian who holds the role of Associate University Librarian of Indigenous Engagement and Collections at the University of Manitoba.

Please see the Appendix on the final pages for a detailed list of titles purchased.

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Appendix

100 Days of Cree by Neal McLeod and Arok Wolvengrey
7 Generations - a Plains Cree Saga by David A. Robertson and Scott B. Henderson
A Feast for All Seasons by Andrew George Jr and Robert Gairns
Ahshia Ton You Should Write It by Jules Delorme
Ahkami Nehiyawetan - Let's Keep Speaking Cree by Solomon Ratt
An English Dakota Dictionary by John P Williamson
Anishinaabemowin Alphabet by Wanda Barker
Anishnaabemwin A Beginners' Ojibway Language Course by Barbara Nolan
awsis - kinky and dishevelled by Louise B Halfe
Bagone Giizhig: The Hole in the Sky/Aaniindi Nitam Anishinaabeg Gaa-Ondaadiziwad /
Where the First People Came From by Leonard and Mary Moose
Beaded Earrings: Techniques and Designs by Ginger and Rex Reddick
Betty by David A. Robertson and Scott B. Henderson
Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden - Agriculture of the Hidatsa Indians by Gilbert Wilson
Calling Down the Sky by Rosanna Deerchild
Cottagers and Indians by Drew Hayden Taylor
Cree by Arok-ed Wolvengrey
Cree by Jean L. Okimasis
Cree Dictionary and Everyday Phrases & Words
Cree Narrative Memory - from Treaties to Contemporary Times by Neal McLeod
Creeboy by Teresa Wouters
day/break by Gwen Benaway
Det'oni-t' tai / Three Feathers by Richard Van Camp, K Mateus, and Doris Camsell
Diamond Willow Walking Stick by Leah Marie Dorion
Di-bayn-di-zi-win (To Own Ourselves) - Embodying Ojibway- Anishinabe Ways by Jerry
 Fontaine and Don McCaskill
Disintegrate/Dissociate by Arielle Twist
Ends/Begins by David A. Robertson and Scott B. Henderson
Fire Song by Adam Garnet Jones
Following the River - Traces of Red River Women by Lorri Neilsen Glenn
Four Faces of the Moon by Amanda Strong and Dr Sherry Farrell Racette
From the Roots Up - Surviving the City Vol. 2 by Tasha Spillett, Natasha Donovan and
 Donovan Yaciuk
Ghost Lake by Nathan Niigan Noodin Adler
Gookom's Language Learning Objiwe by Patricia M. Ningewance
Hold Your Tongue by Matthew Ttreault
I Knew Two Metis Women by Gregory Scofield
Inconvenient Skin / nayhtwan wasakay by Shane L Koyczan, Kent Monkman, and Nadya
 Kwandibens
Indian Use of Wild Plants for Crafts, Food, Medicine, and Charms by Frances Densmore

Indians Don't Cry: Gaawin Mawisiiwag Anishinaabeg by George Kenny and Patricia A. Ningewance

Indigiqueerness : A Conversation about Storytelling by Joshua Whitehead

Iskooniguni Iskweewuk - The Rez Sisters in its original version: Cree by Thomson Highway

Iskotew Iskweew - Poetry of a Northern Rez Girl by Francine Merasty

Iskotew Iskweew: kiwetinok iskonikani iskweesis omasinahikan by Francine Merasty

it was never going to be okay by jaye simpson

Jack Otter Odibaajimowin imaa Waaswaanibiing by Ruth Dyck Fehderau and James Bay Storytellers and Patricia M. Ningewance

khkominawak otcimowiniwwa / Our Grandmothers' Lives As Told in Their Own Words

Kipocihkn by Gregory Scofield

Kiskajeyi- I AM READY by Michelle Sylliboy

Kiss of the Fur Queen by Thomson Highway

Kohkum's Kitchen

k-p-isi-kiskisiyn / The Way I Remember by Solomon Ratt

Learning and Teaching an Ancestral Language: Stories from Manitoba Teachers by Violet Okemaw

leave some for the birds - movements for justice by Marjorie Beaucage

Living in Harmony / Mino-nawae-indawaewin by Basil Johnston

Louis - The Heretic Poems by Gregory Scofield

Love after the End- an Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction by Joshua Whitehead

Maci-Anihinapemowin / Beginning Saulteaux by Margaret Cote and Lynn Cote

Majagalee : the Language of Seasons by Shawna Davis

Mamaskatch - a Cree Coming of Age by Darrel J McLeod

Medicines to Help Us - Traditional Metis Plan Use by Christi Belcourt

mitoni niya nhiyaw / Cree is Who I Truly Am by Sarah Whitecalf, HC Wolfart and Freda Ahenakew

Modern Native Feasts by Andrew George Jr

Moonshot V1 by Hope Nicholson

Moonshot V2 by Hope Nicholson

Moonshot V3 by Hope Nicholson

Mother Earth Plants for Health & Beauty by Carrie Armstrong

Native American Gardening by Joseph Bruchac and Michael J. Caduto

nehiyawetan kikinahk / Speaking Cree in the Home by Andrea Custer, Belinda Daniels, and Solomon Ratt

Nenapohs Ahtahsokewinan Nenapohs Legends by Margaret Cote

nitotamahk ksik (Cree Edition)

Ojibwe Teachings Words Phrases and Puzzles by Mary Anne Maytwayashing

Opimotewina wina kapagamawat Witigowa / Journeys of The One to Strike the Wetigo by Ken Carriere

Pakwa Che Menisu Wild Berries (Cree) by Julie Flett and Jennifer Thomas

Plants Have So Much to Give Us - Anishinaabe Botanical Teachings by Mary Siisip Geniusz and Wendy Makoons Geniusz
Plants, People, and Places
Pocket Cree by Ken Paupanekis
Pocket Dene - a phrasebook for nearly all occasions by Cheryl Herman
Pocket Ojibwe by Patricia M. Ningewance
Pocket Ojibwe for Kids and Parents by Trevor Greyeyes, Maeengan Linklater
Pocket Ojicree by Jerry Sawanas
Pocket Plains Cree for Kids & Parents
Postcolonial Love Poem by Natalie Diaz
Powwow Summer by Nahanni Shingoose
Reclaiming Our Territory, Word by Word - Grassroots Language Teaching by Patricia Ningewance
Recovering Our Ancestors Gardens - Indigenous Recipes and Guide to Diet and Fitness by Devon A. Mihesuah
Red Power - a graphic novel by Brian Wright-McLeod
Relatives With Roots: A Story About Métis Women's Connection to the Land by Leah Marie Dorion and Rita Flamand
Running Down a Dream- a Memoir by Candy Palmater
Sanaaq - an Inuit Novel by Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk, Bernard Saladin d'Anglure, and Peter Frost
she walks for days inside a thousand eyes - a two-spirit story by Sharron Proulx-Turner
Silence to Strength - Writings and Reflections on the 60s Scoop by Christine Miskonoodinkwe Smith
Sovereign Erotics - a Collection of Two-Spirit Literature by Qwo-Li Driskill, Daniel Heath Justice and Deborah Miranda
Spells, Wishes, and the Talking Dead by Wanda John-Kehewin
Spoken Cree, Level I by C. Douglas Ellis
Spoken Cree, Level II by C. Douglas Ellis
Stone (7 Generations - Book 1) by David Alexander Robertson, and Scott B. Henderson
Stories of Métis Women Tales My Kookum Told Me by Marilyn Lizee and Bailey Oster
Stories of Survival and Revenge - From Inuit Folklore by Rachel Qitsualik-Tinsely, Sean Qitsualik-Tinsely, Jeremy Mohler
Tawaw Progressive Indigenous Cuisine by Shane M Chartrand and Jennifer Cockrall-King
The 500 Years of Indigenous Resistance Comic Book by Gord Hill and Pamela Palmater
The Counselling Speeches of Jim Ka-Nipitehtew by Jim K-Npithw, Freda Ahenakew and HC Wolfart
The Dog's Children by Leonard Bloomfield, John D. Nichols and Angeline Williams
the First People Came From
The Fox Wife by Beatrice Deer and DJ Herron
The Lost Teachings / Panuijkatasikl Kina'masuti' by Dozay(Arlene) Christmas, Michael James Isaac, Yolanda Denny
The Moon Speaks Cree by Larry Loyie and Constance Brissenden

The Pact (7 Generations Book 4) by David A. Robertson and Scott B. Henderson
The Scout: Tommy Prince by David A. Robertson and Scott B. Henderson
The Secret of Your Name by David Bouchard and Dennis J Weber
The Sound of Our Language is Connected to Land by
The Way of Thorn and Thunder - the Kynship Chronicles by Daniel Heath Justice
They Knew Both Sides of Medicine - Cree Tales of Curing and Cursing Told by Alice
Ahenakew by HC Wolfart and Freda Ahenakew
Think Indian : Languages Are Beyond Price by Basil H. Johnston
Think Indigenous : Native American Spirituality for a Modern World by Doug Good Feather
This Is What I've Been Told by Juliana Armstrong
This Town Sleeps by Dennis E Staples
This Wound is a World by Billy-Ray Belcourt
Thunder Through My Veins - a Memoir by Gregory Scofield
Tracking the Past Through Legends and Stories
Traditional Ways: Making Snowshoes
TthaNársłth'ér, Our Dene Hero
Under the Ice by Rachel Qitsualik-Tinsley and Jae Korim
Valley of the Birdtail - an Indian Reserve, a White Town, and the Road to Reconciliation by
 Andrew Stobo Sniderman and Douglas Sanderson
VenCo by Cherie Dimaline
Version Control (Reckoner Rises Volume 2) by David A Robertson, Scott B Henderson,
 and Donovan Yaciuk
Walking in Balance by Basil Johnston
Wapikwaniy Beginner's Guide to Métis Floral Beadwork by Amy Briley, Sherry Farrell and
 Gregory Scofield
Wawiyatacimowinisa Funny Little Stories by Arok Wolvengrey
Will I See? By David A Robertson, GMB Chomichuk and iskwe
Witness, I Am by Gregory Scofield
Woods Cree Stories nihithaw acimowina by Solomon Ratt

