

attempts to quash potlatches, the Sun Dance, and other cultural practices.

Beginning in 1889, parents required passes to visit their children interned at residential schools. Controlling parents' access to their children aided and abetted the government's policy of keeping the family and their influence distanced from their children. Agents were encouraged to only provide a pass to parents to visit their children in school no more frequently than four times a year. If a child was ill, and the residential school shared this information with the child's parents, additional passes might be issued.

12 Created residential schools

1886 TO 1996 (FIRST DISCUSSED IN 1840S: LAST SCHOOL CLOSED IN 1996)

The Governor in Council may make regulations, which shall have the force of law, for the committal by justices or Indian agents of children of Indian blood under the age of sixteen years, to such industrial school or boarding school, there to be kept, cared for and educated for a period not extending beyond the time at which such children shall reach the age of eighteen years.

*Indian Act, 1884*¹¹

And so it began: the most aggressive and destructive of all *Indian Act* policies. When the federal government signed the 11 numbered treaties starting in 1871, it assumed responsibility for the education of the Indians of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, as well as portions

of Ontario, British Columbia, and the Northwest Territories. Indian signatories to the treaties realized that life as they knew it was seriously impacted by the influx of Europeans, and they wanted the children to have an education so they could take part in the new wage economy. They did not envision what lay ahead for their children at residential schools. How could they?

Residential schools brought immeasurable human suffering to the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples, the effects of which continue to reverberate through generations of families and many communities. Other policies were harsh but could be worked around. The government banned the potlatch, so practitioners went underground to continue to hold ceremonies; the government pushed people onto small reserves but they still were with their families. But when the government took the children from their families, it was unbearable.

The goal of the schools was to "kill the Indian in the child,"¹² but tragically it was the children themselves who died in overwhelming numbers at these schools. It is estimated that 6,000 of the 150,000 children who attended the schools between the 1870s and 1996 either died or disappeared. The numbers are not precise because no one kept accurate records: not the schools, the churches that managed the schools, or the Indian agents. Children died at the schools from disease, malnourishment, and broken hearts. Many children who escaped from their residential school died on the journey to their home community.

The government did not have a clear policy on discipline, which frequently was in the form of beating and whipping; in the schools, and discipline was arbitrary and

harsh. Indian Affairs Deputy Minister Hayter Reed gave these directions to his staff:

Instructions should be given, if not already sent, to the Principals of the various schools, that children are not to be whipped by anyone save the Principal, and even when such a course is necessary, great discretion should be used and they should not be struck on the head, or punished so severely that bodily harm might ensue. The practice of corporal punishment is considered unnecessary as a general measure of discipline and should only be resorted to for very grave offences and as a deterrent example.¹³

In 1914, Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, acknowledged that the system was open to criticism. He said, "Insufficient care was exercised in the admission of children to the schools. The well-known predisposition of Indians to tuberculosis resulted in a very large percentage of deaths among the pupils. They were housed in buildings not carefully designed for school purposes, and these buildings became infected and dangerous to the inmates." What's remarkable is that he also acknowledged how many children died at residential schools: "*It is quite within the mark to say that fifty per cent of the children who passed through these schools did not live to benefit from the education which they had received therein*"¹⁴ [emphasis added].

Prior to the 1876 *Indian Act*, education was provided at day schools built on reserves for the children to attend and begin their assimilation into settler society, but low attendance impeded this plan. Nicholas Flood Davin

was commissioned to study how the Americans handled the education of native children and provided a report. In 1879 he produced the *Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Halfbreeds*, which became known as the *Davin Report*. The report asserted that if assimilation was to be successful, then it had to start when the child was young, that the schools should be far removed from the home community in order to nullify the influence of the parents, and that their mythology should be replaced with Christianity.

The government revised its policy based on the *Davin Report* and abandoned on-reserve schools in favour of off-reserve, dormitory-style, industrial schools. The government preferred this new system because it separated the children from their parents, thereby allowing for the full indoctrination of the children into Christian beliefs and customs to kill the Indian in the child. Prime Minister John A. Macdonald said to the House of Commons in 1883:

When the school is on the reserve the child lives with its parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits, and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. It has been strongly pressed on myself, as the head of the Department, that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men.¹⁵

In 1920, the Act was amended to combat ongoing frustration over low attendance by making it compulsory for status Indian children to attend residential schools. If parents or guardians did not readily hand over their children to the Indian agent, the *Indian Act* gave power to the agent to enter the family home and seize the children, often with the help of the local constabulary or by the constabulary alone. Parents or guardians who tried to hide the children were liable to be arrested and or imprisoned. The 1927 *Indian Act* stated:

Any parent, guardian or person with whom an Indian child is residing who fails to cause such child, being between the ages aforesaid, to attend school as required by this section after having received three days notice so to do by a truant officer shall, on the complaint of the truant officer, be liable on summary conviction before a justice of the peace or Indian agent to a fine of not more than two dollars and costs, or imprisonment for a period not exceeding ten days or both, and such child may be arrested without a warrant and conveyed to school by the truant officer: Provided that no parent or other person shall be liable to such penalties if such child, (a) is unable to attend school by reason of sickness or other unavoidable cause; (b) has passed the entrance examination for high schools; or, (c) has been excused in writing by the Indian agent or teacher for temporary absence to assist in husbandry or urgent and necessary household duties.¹⁶

The Act stated that children could be excused if they were diligently employed in the schools' farms

or "necessary household duties," such as cooking and cleaning. The children often worked in the fields to raise products for sale to offset costs, or they cooked or cleaned more frequently than they had lessons in classroom. Their education often degenerated into exploited child labour.

Missing school for traditional pursuits was forbidden. In reality, every aspect of the children's former lives was forbidden: they were not allowed to speak their language, practise their traditions, or dress in their own clothing. They could visit their families only during Christian holidays, and only if the parents were compliant with certain rules.

Here is a copy of a letter sent to parents whose children were interned in the Kamloops Indian Residential School. It shows the many rules parents were expected to follow:

KAMLOOPS INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL

KAMLOOPS, B.C.

November 18, 1948

Dear Parents,

It will be your privilege this year to have your children spend Christmas at home with you. The holidays will extend from DECEMBER 18th to JANUARY 3rd. This is a privilege which is being granted if you observe the following regulations of the Indian Department.

1. THE TRANSPORTATION TO THE HOME AND BACK TO THE SCHOOL MUST BE PAID BY THE PARENTS.

The parents must come themselves to get their own children. If they are unable to come they must send

a letter to the Principal of the school stating that the parents of other children from the same Reserve may bring them home. The children will not be allowed to go home alone on the train or bus.

2. THE PARENTS MUST BRING THE CHILDREN BACK TO SCHOOL

If the children are not returned to School on time they will not be allowed to go home for Christmas next year.

I ask you to observe the above regulations in order that this privilege of going home for Christmas may be continued from year to year. It will be a joy for you to have your children with you for Christmas. It will be a joy also for your children and it will bring added cheer and happiness to your home.

Yours sincerely,
Rev. F. O'Grady, O.M.I.,
Principal

The schools, primarily managed by Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, and United churches and a government wanting to shed the financial responsibility of Indians, were chronically underfunded. The buildings were drafty and unsanitary and food for the children was insufficient and often rotten. To augment the finances of the schools, the Act included a statute that allowed the government to collect any treaty annuities due to the children and use the money to maintain the school that the child attended.

The schools were also breeding grounds for diseases such as tuberculosis and influenza. The children, suffering

from the trauma of the absolute loss of everything familiar in their lives, had severely impacted immune systems, which left them vulnerable to disease. It is well known that fear, anxiety, and depression brought on by a dramatic change in environment and lifestyles can have an adverse impact on the immune system.

The children who simply could not survive in this harsh and terrifying environment died at such a rate that it came to the attention of Dr. Peter Bryce, a medical doctor who was hired by the Department of the Interior to manage public health issues in both the Immigration Department and Indian Affairs. In 1907, Bryce released his *Report on the Indian Schools of Manitoba and the North-West Territories*. The report provided grim facts regarding the devastating effects of tuberculosis on the children and recommendations on how to improve the standards of the schools to stem the spread of the disease both in the schools and in the home communities of the students.

Bryce's report was never published by the Department of Indian Affairs, quite likely due to its damning nature and recommendations for expensive renovations. Most of Bryce's recommendations were rejected by the Department of Indian Affairs as too costly and not aligning with the government's policy for rapid, affordable assimilation.

In 1907, the same year that Bryce made his report, the national magazine *Saturday Night* reported on residential schools, observing that "Indian boys and girls are dying like flies... Even war seldom shows as large a percentage of fatalities as does the education system we have imposed on our Indian wards."¹⁷

The Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs at the time of Bryce's report was Duncan Campbell Scott. In 1910, a few years after Bryce's recommendations, Scott reassessed his support for residential schools in a letter to the British Columbia Indian Agent General:

It is readily acknowledged that Indian children lose their natural resistance to illness by habituating so closely in the residential schools, and that they die at a much higher rate than in their villages. But this alone does not justify a change in the policy of this Department, which is geared towards a *final solution* of our Indian Problem.¹⁸ [emphasis added]

Bryce, who was committed to protecting and educating Indigenous children, later wrote *The Story of a National Crime: Being an Appeal for Justice to the Indians of Canada; the Wards of the Nation, Our Allies in the Revolutionary War, Our Brothers-in-Arms in the Great War*. In this slim publication Bryce included some of the letters between himself and Duncan Campbell Scott and commented on Scott's folly in not acting on his and others' recommendations: "In this particular matter, he is counting upon the ignorance and indifference of the public to the fate of the Indians; but with the awakening of the health conscience of the people, we are now seeing on every hand, I feel certain that serious trouble will come out of the departmental inertia, and I am not personally disposed to have any blame fall upon me."¹⁹

Residential schools are not ancient history. The last one closed in 1996, and attendance was mandatory until 1969. The legacy of intergenerational impacts on

Indigenous Peoples will continue for many generations to come.

In 1998, with the "Statement of Reconciliation," the federal government acknowledged the damage inflicted upon First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples and put Canada on the slow, painful path of reconciliation with its shameful relationship with Indigenous Peoples. It was not until 2008, however, that a formal apology, which opens with "The treatment of children in Indian Residential Schools is a *sad chapter* in our history..." [emphasis added] was delivered by then Prime Minister Stephen Harper. (See page 84 for the full transcript of the apology.)

Following the formal apology, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) began its six-year journey across the country, gathering statements from tens of thousands of survivors who had attended the residential schools. In 2015, the TRC produced *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* and the associated 94 Calls to Action on this sad chapter on residential school policies. (See Appendix 3 for the full list of the Calls to Action.)

In the report, the TRC uses the term "cultural genocide" to describe the federal government's policies. The term "cultural genocide" was also used by former Supreme Court Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin in a speech in 2015. She said, "The most glaring blemish on the Canadian historic record relates to our treatment of the First Nations that lived here at the time of colonization." After an initial period of interreliance and equality, she said, Canada developed an "ethos of exclusion and

cultural annihilation. 'Indianness' was not to be tolerated; rather it must be eliminated. In the buzz-word of the day, assimilation; in the language of the 21st century, cultural genocide."²⁰

The United (1986), Anglican (1993), and Presbyterian (1994) churches have also made formal apologies. In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI expressed his "sorrow" to an Assembly of First Nations delegation for the abuse and "deplorable" treatment that Indigenous students suffered at Roman Catholic Church-run residential schools.

So, what has become of the 139 buildings that functioned as schools? The majority of the buildings have been torn down, and it's my understanding that fewer than 10 remain standing. Some of the remaining buildings have been renovated and now act as cultural and learning centres. The school that my father and other family members and friends attended, St. Michael's Indian Residential School in Alert Bay, BC, was torn down on February 18, 2015.

But the apprehension of children from family and community did not end when the government began closing residential schools in the 1950s. The 1960s saw an expansion of the child welfare system, and "by the end of the 1960s, 30 to 40 per cent of the children who were legal wards of the state were Aboriginal children—in stark contrast to the rate of 1 per cent in 1959."²¹ In what is known as the Sixties Scoop, babies and children were taken from their parents and placed in boarding schools or with Euro-Canadian families. "Children continue to be apprehended at alarming rates under circumstances deemed to be 'child neglect' that are instead related to

issues of poverty."²² The Sixties Scoop continued until the 1980s.

The legacy of the residential school system continues to impact Indigenous people, families, and communities. On its doorstep we can lay the responsibility for the high poverty rates, the large number of Indigenous children in foster care, the disproportionate number of incarcerated Indigenous people, and the hundreds of missing and murdered Indigenous women.