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Did the Canadian Government Build Schools to Murder Children?

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I first learned of the Bryce Report in a doctoral dissertation about the Anglican Church's involvement with Indian Residential Schools (Woods, 2012). The Report (Bryce, 1907) outlined tragic health conditions faced by indigenous students, and its publication resulted in the Anglican Church's Canadian Synod recommending that the schools be closed. So when the *Globe and Mail* ran a commemorative story on Dr. Peter Bryce (Fraser et al., 2021), I eagerly anticipated more nuggets about this fine man's career. I was left both disappointed and concerned.

Bryce was a medical officer with the federal government who in 1907 reported that the 35 Indian Residential Schools he visited were often overcrowded, frequently lacked proper nutrition for students, and had substandard sanitation. He said that twenty-four percent of students who entered these residential schools died of tuberculosis before their 16th birthday – double the rate in their home communities.

This data is grim enough, but the article's authors concluded in their first paragraph, "These effects of colonialism aren't a dark chapter now being revealed, but rather the main plot in a narrative that defines Canada... The colonial attempts to assimilate were genocidal." The word "genocide" refers to any attempt to eliminate a racial or ethnic group from the human gene pool, for example, by deliberately injecting people of a particular race with a lethal virus. In a later work, Bryce (1922) states that the sick aboriginal children were infected not in the schools themselves but in their home communities. Nonetheless, the authors of this memorial article accuse the federal government of criminally "turning a deaf ear" to Bryce's report. The phrase "deaf ear" implies the government of Wilfred Laurier ignored it. In actual fact, in 1908 Frank Oliver, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, tabled a proposal on behalf of the federal government to replace the residential schools with a system of day schools. With both the Anglican Synod and the federal government agreeing to close the Indian Residential Schools, what went wrong?

In defiance of their national synod, the Western Anglican Church joined with the Catholics, Presbyterians and Methodists lobbying to keep the residential schools open. This effort was crucially supported by such new organizations as "The Friends of the Indian and Half-Breed Population of Alberta" that included indigenous leaders. Bryce himself had not recommended the closure of these schools, just the opposite. He was concerned that school attendance in 1905-06 stood at only 52% of the school age population and he recommended that more Indian residential boarding schools be built. He (Bryce, 1907) said that school attendance had been dropping since 1901 because 1) the distance between the schools and the reserves made travel between them difficult, 2) school staff were often poorly trained, 3) pupils had little opportunity for practical success after graduation, 4) the number of pupils at any given school was

dependent on the abilities of principals to recruit students, 5) Indian Agents frequently failed to support the schools, and 6) parents generally disliked having their children so far from home. It is possible that the *Globe and Mail* authors were unaware of the 1907 attempt to close the schools, but one wonders why important points such as these contained in the Bryce Report were ignored by the scholars commemorating his legacy.

With the collapse of the buffalo and the fur trade, the chiefs who were signatories of the treaties with Canada realized that a modern education was essential to survive in the new economy. The promise of education is included in every treaty they signed. But residential schools were not the only solution. In 1910, after petitioning the federal government, Little Pine reserve in Saskatchewan got its own day school. Reverend Stan Cuthand later recalled, "Our parents had never had schools before, but they wanted us to learn English. When the school was built, there was so much cooperation between everyone that everyone on the reserve sent their kids there" (Donnelly, 1998, p. 7).

Schools on-reserve where children went home after each school day were not unique to Little Pine. According to the Bryce Report, during the 1905-06 school year, 694 students attended 74 such day schools. By way of comparison, 1,739 attended 38 boarding schools; and, 693 students were in 8 industrial schools. The boarding and industrial schools are generally grouped together as "Indian Residential Schools" in today's parlance, but historically the industrial schools were meant to pay for their operating costs through student labour while the boarding schools were dependent on a government per capita grant under a program that began in 1898. Bryce recommended the use of boarding schools because they were closer to reserves than industrial schools and the principals were generally more closely in touch with the parents. Day schools, he opined, generally offered lower quality education.

The authors of the *Globe* article offered another unsupported assertion with, "The Christian churches operated these schools for profit and their model supported the genocidal efforts of the federal government" (Fraser et al., 2021, para 6). In fact, no churches made a profit off these schools and some years the Anglican Synod spent half of its national revenue to subsidize them (Woods, 2012). In the initial deal brokered with the federal government, the churches would pay the operating costs of schools if the government paid the capital costs. The churches planned to pay for these costs through industrial activity such as farming, ranching, fishing or logging, with the students learning skills they could later use after graduation. When it became clear that these "industrial schools" would never become financially self-sufficient, the government began paying the per capita grant. The boarding schools were dependent on this grant and church donations, with the resulting financial incentive to accept any student, no matter how diseased. As I stated in my article on Residential School Syndrome (Robertson, 2006), the motivation of the churches was not financial but religious – they were in the business of saving souls.

The debates about the merits of different types of schools continued into the modern era. For example, despite having a new day school in their community by the 1970s, half the parents in Stanley Mission continued to send their children to the Indian Residential School in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, some 240 kilometres distant. In the 1980s, I co-authored a paper (Robertson and Redman, 1988) to transfer the educational function of the Qu'Appelle Indian Residential School to a board made up of chiefs and councillors. Indian Residential Schools had

been closed in most of the rest of Canada by 1969, but in Saskatchewan the schools remained open at the request of indigenous people, with boards consisting of chiefs and counsellors responsible for the physical plant and the Department of Indian Affairs responsible for instruction. In preparation for our report, we asked the chiefs why they wanted to keep these schools open. They told us that the quality of education was higher than was generally found in band day schools because the concentration of larger numbers of students allowed for better programming, including sports. In addition, they said, the residential schools were a place to send children from dysfunctional families.

During my forty years as a practicing psychologist, I have heard from clients who viewed their own residential schools as safe havens from their families. This child welfare function was underscored when I gave psycho-educational assessments to forty children at the Prince Albert Indian Residential School in 1999. It had officially closed as a residential school three years earlier, but was still open as a child welfare institution with the same staff and program.

We all abhor the conditions in which many aboriginal children were malnourished, beaten and sexually molested in residential schools, but conditions in these schools varied with time and place. For example, although tuberculosis was epidemic during Peter Bryce's time, he found three schools where no children had died. He said the principals in these schools used modern methods including proper ventilation to combat the disease. That fact, neglected in the *Globe and Mail* article, is more damning of the government of the day than the generalization given because it shows the government could have done more. But was this genocide?

A problem with reducing history to a single political narrative and making the facts fit that narrative is that we then lose the lessons that history can teach. I knew Rev. Cuthand personally both as a child when visiting his reserve and as an adult at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College. He reversed the usual stereotype by pushing education first and religion second. The education he commended included the technologies of mind that flowed from the European Enlightenment. It is those technologies of mind that drove the scientific, commercial and industrial revolutions, and he wanted aboriginal people to be part of that. Bryce agreed. By the time he wrote *The Story of a National Disgrace* (Bryce, 1922), the Indian Act had been amended making school attendance for children age 7 to 17 compulsory, but the federal government still had not forced the schools to implement the medical practices necessary to successfully combat tuberculosis. Bryce's recommendations in his new tract were that: 1) more Indian Residential Schools be built of the boarding school variety, 2) the government take control of the administration of these schools, 3) the school curricula used should be that of the provinces, and 4) the health of students should be guarded by proper medical inspections. He was accusing the government of negligence, not genocide.

Both Bryce and Cuthand were arguing that aboriginal children should receive an education that was based on science and reason. In *The Medicine Wheel Revisited* (Robertson, 2021a), I suggest that while Enlightenment technologies transcend culture, they are tied to Europe through a process of historical descent. Each culture can better appropriate technologies by linking them to their own cultural antecedents. The Indian Residential Schools were not equipped to accomplish this, but cultures aboriginal to North America have the capacity to make such appropriations

today. Leaving out facts that are inconvenient to a political narrative will not help us achieve this goal.

While it is possible that Fraser, Logan and Oxford were ignorant of the history of indigenous schooling leading up to the Bryce report, they have no excuse for distorting the words that are actually in the report. Their stated purpose as outlined in the first paragraph of their article was to outline “the main plot in a narrative that defines Canada....” The main plot of Wokism, a political ideology that combines aspects of social justice, postmodernism, Marxism, and Fascism, without being true to any (Coughlin and Higgins, 2019; Pluckrose and Lindsay, 2020; Robertson, 2021b) is to undermine Western civilization and the Enlightenment concepts of science, reason, and humanism upon which that civilization is based. This is not what educational pioneers like Bryce and Cuthand fought for.

It was disappointing that the *Globe and Mail* chose to deny their readers the broader view by refusing to run an earlier version of this rebuttal. Even more disturbing is the federal government’s involvement in the construction of this Woke-friendly narrative. Two of the authors of the originating article (Fraser and Oxford) list their professional affiliation as “Defining Moments Canada,” a new federally funded organization whose website declares their purpose is to “model innovative commemorative digital methods to engage young Canadians with their history.” From this article it would appear this engagement is skewed in a political direction.

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