The history

A group of students and parents from the Saddle Lake Reserve, en route to the Methodist-operated school in Red Deer, Alberta. Woodruff, Library and Archives Canada, PA-040715.

It can start with a knock on the door one morning. It is the local Indian agent, or the parish priest, or, perhaps, a Mounted Police officer. The bus for residential school leaves that morning. It is a day the parents have long been dreading. Even if the children have been warned in advance, the morning's events are still a shock. The officials have arrived and the children must go.

For tens of thousands of Aboriginal children for over a century, this was the beginning of their residential schooling. They were torn from their parents, who often surrendered them only under threat of prosecution. Then, they were hurled into a strange and frightening place, one in which their parents and culture would be demeaned and oppressed.

For Frederick Ernest Koe, it started when the Anglican minister and the Mounted Police arrived with a message that he had to leave his parents' home in Aklavik in the Northwest Territories that morning. "And I didn't get to say goodbye to my dad or my brother Allan, didn't get to pet my dogs or nothing."[1]

The day she left for the Lestock, Saskatchewan, school, Marlene Kayseas's parents drove her into the town of Wadena. "There was a big truck there. It had a back door and that truck was full of kids and there was no windows on that truck."[2] Larry Beardy travelled by train from Churchill, Manitoba, to the Anglican residential school in Dauphin, Manitoba—a journey of 1,200 kilometres. As soon as they realized that they were leaving their parents behind, the younger children started crying. At every

stop, the train took on more children and they would start to cry as well. "That train I want to call that train of tears."[3] Florence Horassi was taken to the Fort Providence, Northwest Territories, school in a small airplane. On its way to the school, the plane stopped at a number of small communities to pick up students. "When the plane took off, there's about six or five older ones, didn't cry, but I saw tears come right out of their eyes. Everybody else was crying. There's a whole plane crying. I wanted to cry, too, 'cause my brother was crying, but I held my tears back and held him."[4]

The arrival at school was often even more traumatizing than the departure from home or the journey. Lily Bruce's parents were in tears when they left her and her brother at the Alert Bay, British Columbia, school.[5] At Fort Chipewyan in northern Alberta, Vitaline Elsie Jenner fought to stay with her mother. "I was screaming and hollering. And in my language I said, 'Mama, Mama, *kâya nakasin*' and in English it was, 'Mom, Mom, don't leave me.' 'Cause that's all I knew was to speak Cree. And so the nun took us."[6]

Nellie Ningewance was raised in Hudson, Ontario, and went to the Sioux Lookout, Ontario, school in the 1950s and 1960s. "When we arrived we had to register that we had arrived, then they took us to cut our hair."[7] Bernice Jacks became very frightened when her hair was cut on her arrival at a school in the Northwest Territories. "I could see my hair falling. And I couldn't do nothing. And I was so afraid my mom … I wasn't thinking about myself. I was thinking about Mom. I say, 'Mom's gonna be really mad. And June is gonna be angry. And it's gonna be my fault.'"[8]

Marthe Basile-Coocoo recalled feeling a chill on first seeing the Pointe Bleue, Québec, school.

> It was something like a grey day, it was a day without sunshine. It was, it was the impression that I had, that I was only six years old, then, well, the nuns separated us, my brothers, and then my uncles, then I no longer understood. Then that, that was a period there, of suffering, nights of crying, we all gathered in a corner, meaning that we came together, and there we cried. Our nights were like that.[9]

Pauline St-Onge was traumatized by just the sight of the Sept-Îles school in Québec. She fought back when her father tried to take her into the school. "I thought in my child's head I said: 'you would … you would make me go there, but I will learn nothing, nothing, nothing.'"[10]

Campbell Papequash was taken, against his will, to residential school in 1946. "And after I was taken there they took off my clothes and then they deloused me. I didn't know what was happening but I learned about it later, that they were delousing me; 'the dirty, no-good-for-nothing savages, lousy.'"[11]

Roy Denny was perplexed and frightened by the clothing that the priests and sisters wore at the Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia, school. "We were greeted by this man dressed in black with a long gown. That was the priest, come to find later. And the

"The only building that I knew up to that time, that moment in my life was the one-storey house that we had. And when I got to the residential school, I seen this big monster of a building, and I've never seen any buildings that, that large, that high." – Calvin Myerion, Brandon, Manitoba, school. United Church of Canada Board of Home Missions, 86.158P/ 22N.

nuns with their black, black outfits with the white collar and a white, white collar and, like a breastplate of white."[12] Calvin Myerion recalled being overwhelmed by the size of the Brandon, Manitoba, school. "The only building that I knew up to that time, that moment in my life was the one-storey house that we had. And when I got to the residential school, I seen this big monster of a building, and I've never seen any buildings that, that large, that high."[13] Archie Hyacinthe compared the experience to that of being captured and taken into captivity. "That's when the trauma started for me, being separated from my sister, from my parents, and from our, our home. We were no longer free. It was like being, you know, taken to a strange land, even though it was our, our, our land, as I understood later on."[14] When she first went to the Amos, Québec, school, Margo Wylde could not speak any French. "I said to myself, 'How am I going to express myself? How will I make people understand what I'm saying?' And I wanted to find my sisters to ask them to come and get me. You know it's sad to say, but I felt I was a captive."[15]

On their arrival at residential school, students often were required to exchange the clothes they were wearing for school-supplied clothing. This could mean the loss of homemade clothing that was of particular value and meaning to them. Murray Crowe said his clothes from home were taken and burned at the school that he attended in

Boys at the Sioux Lookout, Ontario, school in the 1930s in their school uniforms. General Synod Archives; Anglican Church of Canada; P75-103-S7-127.

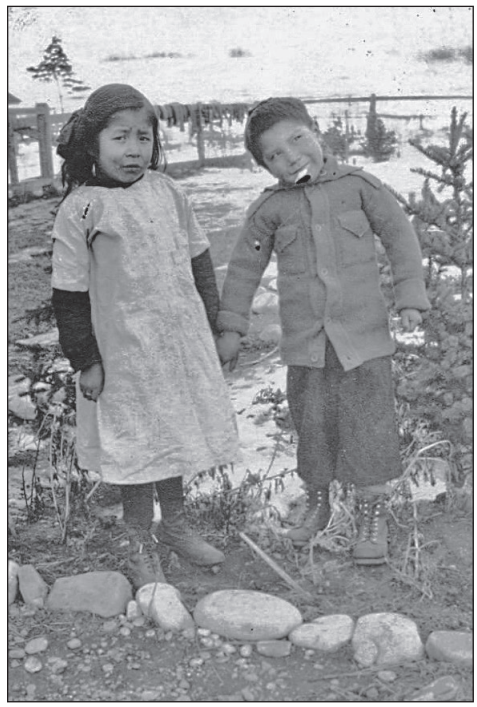
northwestern Ontario.[16] When Wilbur Abrahams's mother sent him to the Alert Bay school in British Columbia, she outfitted him in brand-new clothes. When he arrived at the school, he was told to hand in this outfit in exchange for school clothing. "That was the last time I saw my new clothes. Dare not ask questions."[17] Martin Nicholas of Nelson House, Manitoba, went to the Pine Creek, Manitoba, school in the 1950s. "My mom had prepared me in Native clothing. She had made me a buckskin jacket, beaded with fringes.... And my mom did beautiful work, and I was really proud of my clothes. And when I got to residential school, that first day I remember, they stripped us of our clothes."[18] On her arrival at the Presbyterian school in Kenora, Ontario, Lorna Morgan was wearing "these nice little beaded moccasins that my grandma had made me to wear for school, and I was very proud of them." She said they were taken from her and thrown in the garbage.[19]

Gilles Petiquay, who attended the Pointe Bleue school, was shocked by the fact that each student was assigned a number. "I remember that the first number that I had at the residential school was 95. I had that number—95—for a year. The second number was number 4. I had it for a longer period of time. The third number was 56. I also kept it for a long time. We walked with the numbers on us."[20]

Older brothers were separated from younger brothers, older sisters were separated from younger sisters, and brothers and sisters were separated from each other. Wilbur Abrahams climbed up the steps to the Alert Bay school behind his sisters and started following them to the girls' side of the school. Then, he felt a staff member pulling

him by the ear, telling him to turn the other way. "I have always believed that, I think at that particular moment, my spirit left."[21]

When Peter Ross was enrolled at the Immaculate Conception school in Aklavik, Northwest Territories, it was the first time he had ever been parted from his sisters. He said that in all the time he was at the school, he was able to speak with them only at Christmas and on Catholic feast days.[22] Daniel Nanooch recalled that he talked with his sister only four times a year at the Wabasca, Alberta, school. "They had a fence in the playground. Nobody was allowed near the fence. The boys played on this side, the girls played on the other side. Nobody was allowed to go to that fence there and talk to the girls through the fence or whatever, you can't."[23]



The strict segregation of the sexes at the schools meant that brothers and sisters were quickly separated from one another. General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada, P7538-635.

The only reason Bernice Jacks had wanted to go to residential school was to be with her older sister. But once she was there, she discovered they were to sleep in separate dormitories. On the occasions when she slipped into the older girls' dormitory and crawled into her sister's bed, her sister scolded her and sent her away: "My sister never talked to me like that before."[24] Helen Kakekayash's older sister tried to comfort her when she first arrived at the McIntosh, Ontario, school. She recalled that "she would try to talk to me, and she would get spanked."[25] Bernard Catcheway said that even though he and his sister were both attending the Pine Creek school, they could not communicate with each other. "I couldn't talk to her, I couldn't wave at her. If you did you'd get, you know a push in the head by a nun."[26] On her second day at the Kamloops school in British Columbia, Julianna Alexander went to speak to her brother. "Did I ever get a good pounding and licking, get over there, you can't go over there, you can't talk to him, you know. I said, 'Yeah, but he's my brother.'"[27]

Taken from their homes, stripped of their belongings, and separated from their siblings, residential school children lived in a world dominated by fear, loneliness, and lack of affection.

William Herney, who attended the Shubenacadie school in Nova Scotia, recalled the first few days in the school as being frightening and bewildering. "Within those few days, you had to learn, because otherwise you're gonna get your head knocked off. Anyway, you learned everything. You learned to obey. And one of the rules that you didn't break, you obey, and you were scared, you were very scared."[28] Raymond Cutknife recalled that when he attended the Hobbema school in Alberta, he "lived with fear."[29] Of his years in two different Manitoba schools, Timothy Henderson said, "Every day was, you were in constant fear that, your hope was that it wasn't you today that we're going to, that was going to be the target, the victim. You know, you weren't going to have to suffer any form of humiliation."[30] Shirley Waskewitch said that in Kindergarten at the Catholic school in Onion Lake, Saskatchewan, "I learned the fear, how to be so fearful at six years old. It was instilled in me."[31]

At the Fort Alexander, Manitoba, school, Patrick Bruyere used to cry himself to sleep. "There was, you know, a few nights I remember that I just, you know, cried myself to sleep, I guess, because of, you know, wanting to see my mom and dad."[32] Ernest Barkman, who attended the Pine Creek school, recalled, "I was really lonely and I cried a lot, my brother who was with me said I cried a lot."[33] Paul Dixon, who attended schools in Québec and Ontario, said that at night, children tried to weep silently. "If one child was caught crying, eh, oh, everybody was in trouble."[34] Betsy Annahatak grew up in Kangirsuk, in northern Québec, which was then known as Payne Bay. When her parents were on the land, she lived in a small hostel in the community. "When one person would start crying, all the, all the little girls would start crying; all of us. We were different ages. And we would cry like little puppies or dogs, right into the night, until we go to sleep; longing for our families."[35]

Students' hearts were hardened. Rick Gilbert remembered the Williams Lake, British Columbia, school as a loveless place. "That was one thing about this school was that when you got hurt or got beat up or something, and you started crying, nobody comforted you. You just sat in the corner and cried and cried till you got tired of crying then you got up and carried on with life."[36] Nick Sibbeston, who was placed in the Fort Providence school in the Northwest Territories at the age of five, recalled it as a place where children hid their emotions. "In residential school you quickly learn that you should not cry. If you cry you're teased, you're shamed out, you're even punished."[37] One former student said that during her time at the Sturgeon Landing school in Saskatchewan, she could not recall a staff member ever smiling at a child.[38] Jack Anawak recalled of his time at Chesterfield Inlet, in what is now Nunavut, in the 1950s that "there was no love, there was no feelings, it was just supervisory."[39] Lydia Ross, who attended the Cross Lake school in Manitoba, said, "If you cried, if you got hurt and cried, there was no, nobody to, nobody to comfort, comfort you, nobody to put their arms."[40] Stephen Kakfwi, who attended Grollier Hall in Inuvik and Grandin College in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories, said this lack of compassion affected the

way students treated one another. "No hugs, nothing, no comfort. Everything that, I think, happened in the residential schools, we picked it up: we didn't get any hugs; you ain't going to get one out of me I'll tell you that."[41] Victoria McIntosh said that life at the Fort Alexander, Manitoba, school taught her not to trust anyone. "You learn not to cry anymore. You just get harder. And yeah, you learn to shut down."[42]

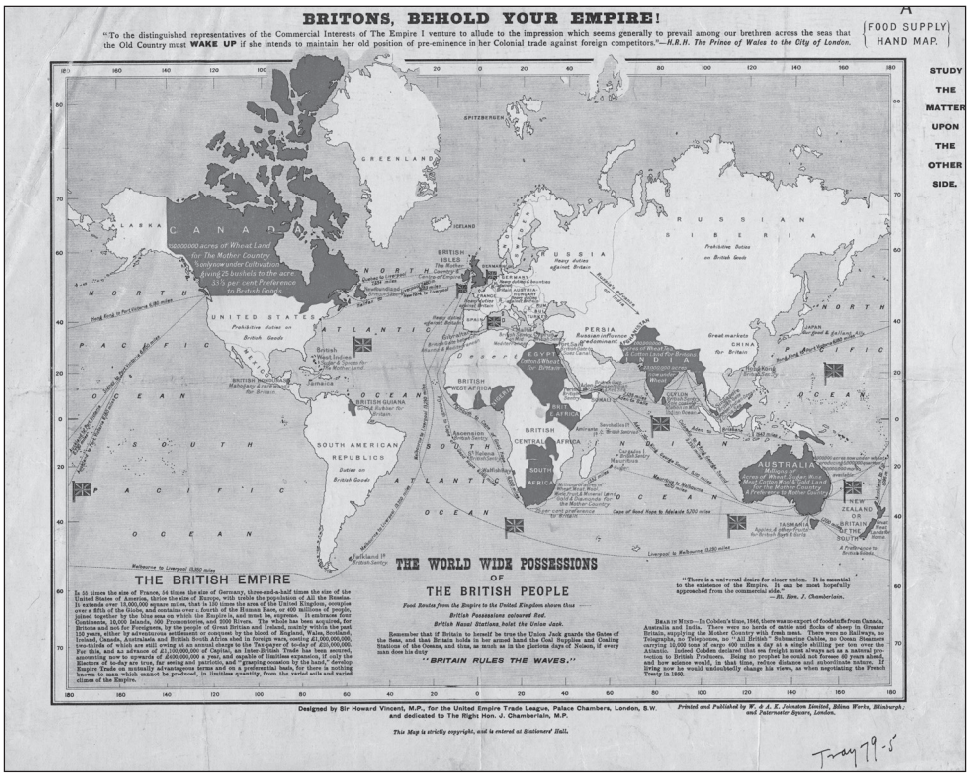
These accounts all come from statements made by former residential school students to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. These events all took place in Canada within the realm of living memory. Like previous generations of residential school children, these children were sent to what were, in most cases, badly constructed, poorly maintained, overcrowded, unsanitary fire traps. Many children were fed a substandard diet and given a substandard education, and worked too hard. For far too long, they died in tragically high numbers. Discipline was harsh and unregulated; abuse was rife and unreported. It was, at best, institutionalized child neglect.

The people who built, funded, and operated the schools offered varying justifications for this destructive intrusion into the lives of Aboriginal families. Through it, they wished to turn the children into farmers and farmers' wives. They wanted the children to abandon their Aboriginal identity and come to know the Christian god. They feared that if the children were not educated, they would be a menace to the social order of the country. Canadian politicians wished to find a cheap way out of their long-term commitments to Aboriginal people. Christian churches sought government support for their missionary efforts. The schools were part of the colonization and conversion of Aboriginal people, and were intended to bring civilization and salvation to their children. These were the rationales that were used to justify making the lives of so many children so unhappy.

The imperial context

> The whole part of the residential school was a part of a bigger scheme of colonization. There was intent; the schools were there with the intent to change people, to make them like others and to make them not fit.
>
> And today, you know, we have to learn to decolonize.
>
> — Shirley Flowers, Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada[43]

The mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada requires it to report on "the history, purpose, operation and supervision" of Canada's residential schools. These schools were part of a process that brought European states and Christian churches together in a complex and powerful manner. The history of



By the end of the nineteenth century, the British Empire spanned the globe. This map was intended to convince Britons of the benefits of empire. In it, Canada was primarily valued for its farmland and as a captive market for British goods. Library and Archives Canada, NMC8207, e011076405-v8.

the schools can be best understood in the context of this relationship between the growth of global, European-based empires and the Christian churches. Starting in the sixteenth century, European states gained control of Indigenous peoples' lands throughout the world. It was an era of mass migration. Millions of Europeans arrived as colonial settlers in nearly every part of the world. Millions of Africans were transported in the European-led slave trade, in which coastal Africans collaborated. Traders from India and China spread throughout the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, bringing with them indentured servants whose lives were little different from those of slaves.[44] The activities of explorers, farmers, prospectors, trading companies, or missionaries often set the stage for expansionary wars, the negotiation and the breaking of Treaties, attempts at cultural assimilation, and the exploitation and marginalization of the original inhabitants of the colonized lands.[45] Over time, Indigenous children in places as distant from one another as East Africa, Australia, and Siberia would be separated from their parents and sent to residential schools.[46]

The spread of European-based empires was set in motion in the fifteenth century when the voyages of maritime explorers revealed potential sources of new wealth to the monarchs of Europe. The Spanish conquest of the Aztecs and the Incas gave Spain, and ultimately all of Europe, access to the resources of North and South America. This not only enriched the Old World, but it also unleashed an unceasing wave of migration, trade, conquest, and colonization.[47] It marked the beginning of the creation of a European-dominated global economy. Although it was led initially by Spain and Portugal, this era of imperial expansion came to be directed by Holland, France, and, in the end, most stunningly by Britain.[48]

Empires were established militarily. They engaged in extensive and violent wars with one another, maintained a military presence on their frontiers, and conducted innumerable military campaigns to put down nationalist uprisings.[49] Colonies were established to be exploited economically. The benefits of empire could come directly as taxes, as precious metals, or as raw materials for industries in the homeland. Colonies often were required to purchase their imports solely from the homeland, making them a captive market.[50]

The mere presence of Indigenous people in these newly colonized lands blocked settler access to the land.[51] To gain control of the land of Indigenous people, colonists negotiated Treaties, waged wars of extinction, eliminated traditional landholding practices, disrupted families, and imposed a political and spiritual order that came complete with new values and cultural practices.[52] Treaty promises often went unfulfilled. United States General William Tecumseh Sherman is quoted as having said, "We have made more than one thousand treaties with the various Indian tribes, and have not kept one of them." In commenting on Sherman's statement in 1886, C. C. Painter, a critic of American Indian policy, observed that the United States had

> never intended to keep them. They were not made to be kept, but to serve a present purpose, to settle a present difficulty in the easiest manner possible, to acquire a desired good with the least possible compensation, and then to be disregarded as soon as this purpose was tainted and we were strong enough to enforce a new and more profitable arrangement.[53]

The outcome was usually disastrous for Indigenous people, while the chief beneficiaries of empire were the colonists and their descendants. Many of the colonies they settled grew to be among the most prosperous societies in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century world.[54] Settler colonies often went on to gain political independence. In the case of Canada and the United States of America, these newly created nations spread across North America. As they expanded, they continued to incorporate Indigenous peoples and their lands into empires. Colonialism remains an ongoing process, shaping both the structure and the quality of the relationship between the settlers and Indigenous peoples.

At their height, the European empires laid claim to most of the earth's surface and controlled the seas.[55] Numerous arguments were advanced to justify such extravagant interventions into the lands and lives of other peoples. These were largely elaborations on two basic concepts: 1) the Christian god had given the Christian nations the right to colonize the lands they 'discovered' as long as they converted the Indigenous populations; and 2) the Europeans were bringing the benefits of civilization (a concept that was intertwined with Christianity) to the 'heathen.' In short, it was contended that people were being colonized for their own benefit, either in this world or the next.

In the fifteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church, building on the traditions of the Roman Empire, conceived of itself as the guardian of a universal world order.[56] The adoption of Christianity within the Roman Empire (which defined itself as 'civilized') reinforced the view that to be civilized was to be Christian. The Catholic papacy was already playing a role in directing and legitimizing colonialism prior to Christopher Columbus's voyages to the Americas in the 1490s, largely by granting Catholic kingdoms the right to colonize lands they 'discovered.'[57] In 1493, Pope Alexander VI issued the first of four orders, referred to as "papal bulls" (a term that takes its name from the Latin word for the mould used to seal the document), that granted most of North and South America to Spain, the kingdom that had sponsored Columbus's voyage of the preceding year. These orders helped shape the political and legal arguments that have come to be referred to as the "Doctrine of Discovery," which was used to justify the colonization of the Americas in the sixteenth century. In return, the Spanish were expected to convert the Indigenous peoples of the Americas to Christianity.[58]

Other European rulers rejected the Pope's ability to give away sovereignty over half the world.[59] But they did not necessarily reject the Doctrine of Discovery—they simply modified it. The English argued that a claim to 'discovered lands' was valid if the 'discoverer' was able to take possession of them.[60] Harman Verelst, who promoted the colonization in the eighteenth century of what is now the southern coast of the United States, wrote that "this Right arising from the first discovery is the first and fundamental Right of all European Nations, as to their Claim of Lands in America."[61] This Doctrine of Discovery was linked to a second idea: the lands being claimed were *terra nullius*—no man's land—and therefore open to claim. On the basis of this concept, the British government claimed ownership of the entire Australian continent. (There, the doctrine of *terra nullius* remained the law until it was successfully challenged in court in 1992.)[62] Under this doctrine, imperialists could argue that the presence of Indigenous people did not void a claim of *terra nullius*, since the Indigenous people simply occupied, rather than owned, the land. True ownership, they claimed, could come only with European-style agriculture.[63]

Underlying these arguments was the belief that the colonizers were bringing civilization to savage people who could never civilize themselves. The 'civilizing mission' rested on a belief of racial and cultural superiority. European writers and politicians

A Church Missionary Society school, in Freetown, Sierra Leone. In the nineteenth century, European-based missionary societies established residential schools around the world in an effort to spread the Christian gospel and civilize the 'heathen.' Mary Evans Picture Library, 10825826.

often arranged racial groups in a hierarchy, each with their own set of mental and physical capabilities. The 'special gifts' of the Europeans meant it was inevitable that they would conquer the lesser peoples. Beneath the Europeans, in descending order, were Asians, Africans, and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas and Australia. Some people held that Europeans had reached the pinnacle of civilization through a long and arduous process. In this view, the other peoples of the world had been held back by such factors as climate, geography, and migration. Through a civilizing process, Europeans could, however, raise the people of the world up to their level. This view was replaced in the nineteenth century by a racism that chose to cloak itself in the language of science, and held that the peoples of the world had differing abilities. Some argued that, for genetic reasons, there were limits on the ability of the less-developed peoples to improve. In some cases, it was thought, contact with superior races could lead to only one outcome: the extinction of the inferior peoples.[64]

These ideas shaped global policies towards Indigenous peoples. In 1883, Britain's Lord Rosebery, a future British prime minister, told an Australian audience, "It is on the British race, whether in Great Britain, or the United States, or the Colonies, or wherever it may be, that rest the highest hopes of those who try to penetrate the dark future, or who seek to raise and better the patient masses of mankind."[65] Residential schools were established in the shadow of these ideas. In the year that Rosebery gave this speech, the Canadian government opened its first industrial residential school for Aboriginal people at Battleford on the Canadian Prairies.[66]