Canada, Aboriginal Peoples, and Residential Schools

They Came for the Children

“In order to educate the children properly we must separate them from their families. Some people may say that this is hard but if we want to civilize them we must do that.”

Hector Langevin,
Public Works Minister of Canada, 1883
December 31, 2011  
The Parties of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement

To the Parties,

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is pleased to submit this Report on the history, purpose, operation, and supervision of the residential school system, the effect and consequences of the system, and its ongoing legacy, as required by the Commission's mandate.

This Report was prepared in compliance with the Commission's obligation to prepare such a Report at the two-year point of its mandate. However, it has had to have been written without a review of government and church documents, as the Commission has experienced significant delays in the collection and receipt of those documents. In addition, the gathering of statements from survivors and those otherwise involved in the schools is ongoing. The Commission anticipates that once an analysis of those documents and statements has been compiled, more historical information will become available. Based on that and its ongoing research, the Commission will be submitting a fuller and more detailed report, along with a complete set of recommendations, at the completion of its full five-year mandate.

Yours respectfully,

Justice Murray Sinclair  
Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

Chief Wilton Littlechild  
Commissioner

Marie Wilson  
Commissioner
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During his inspection of the Native American boarding school system in the United States in 1879, Nicholas Flood Davin had been impressed by the role that people of mixed ancestry played in the operation of the schools. He concluded that Métis could serve as the “natural mediator between the Government and the red man, and also his natural instructor.” He recommended that the federal government educate the Métis along with First Nations people in “self-reliance and industry” in industrial schools. The Oblate missionaries also sought to use the Métis as a bridge between the two cultures. This was one reason why Bishop Alexandre Taché sent Louis Riel and two other young Métis to Montreal for additional education at a seminary in 1858. Riel never taught at a Canadian residential school, but he did teach Métis children at a Jesuit boarding school in Montana in the 1880s. Riel’s sister Sara was a Grey Nun who taught at a residential school in Île-à-la-Crosse in what is now Saskatchewan from 1871 until her death in 1883. This, however, was not the normal residential school experience for Métis people.
The Métis nation emerged out of the fur trade when traders and Aboriginal women established long-lasting relationships, and raised families. Early Métis communities appeared around the Great Lakes, and moved west with the fur trade. When the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North-West Company merged in 1821, numerous trading posts closed, and many of their Métis employees moved to Red River, which evolved into a centre for a Métis culture with distinct values, forms of organizations, arts, and language.

The Métis played central roles in both the Red River Resistance of 1870 and the Northwest Rebellion of 1885. In 1870 their efforts led to the creation of Manitoba as a province, and the provision of 1.4 million acres of land to be distributed to the children of Métis families. The gains were short-lived: speculators dispossessed many of the Métis; and settlers from Ontario treated the Manitoba Métis with disdain, sometimes subjecting them to violent attacks. By 1885 over three quarters of the Métis population of Manitoba had left for what is now Saskatchewan and Alberta. Métis communities also developed in the North and the West in places such as the Mackenzie River Valley. Following the defeat of the 1885 rebellion, which was sparked by government failure to address Métis concerns over land, the federal government executed Riel, and much of the Métis leadership was dispersed.

The churches often accepted Métis children into residential schools, but the federal government preferred to limit its support to status Indians. Funding Métis students, from Ottawa’s perspective, was too costly, unnecessary (since the Métis often were Christian and considered “sufficiently civilized”), and, ultimately, not the federal government’s responsibility. The policy was not applied consistently. Initially, schools were allowed to take in Métis children when there were empty beds, if parents were prepared to pay, or if Indian Affairs had determined that the parents were living “as Indians.” This term was broad enough to include living on a reserve, hunting and trapping, or living in conditions of severe poverty.

After 1885, as Euro-Canadian immigrants settled the West, the Métis were increasingly marginalized, living in shantytowns on the edges of town or just outside reserves. Few had the money to take up farming, and many relied on manual labour, such as freighting, lumbering, collecting buffalo bones, harvesting roots, and hunting and trapping, to survive. Most of their communities lacked the finances to build schools, and public schools often were unwilling to admit Métis children.

A 1936 commission on Métis people in Alberta concluded that 80 percent of Métis children were not in school. For those parents who wanted to see their children educated, the only option was to try to have them accepted in a residential school. Anglican and Catholic missionaries sometimes were moved to establish schools in an effort to convert Métis parents and children to their faith. The Oblates, for example, established schools in Fort Providence and Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, to provide Métis fur-trade employees with an alternative to sending their children to Anglican schools. In some cases, Catholic Métis parents who sent their children to Anglican schools were excommunicated. When Treaty 8 was negotiated in 1899, Oblate missionaries encouraged Métis parents to declare themselves Indians rather than Métis. This would allow them
to send their children to residential school—and the church to collect a subsidy from the federal government.¹⁷  
Oblate Father Albert Lacombe at the High River school in Alberta, and Father Joseph Hugonnard at the Qu’Appelle, Saskatchewan, school were among the many residential school principals who recruited Métis students. They were acting both out of concern for the educational needs of Métis children and in response to the problems they were having in convincing First Nation parents to send their children to residential school. The federal government insisted that Métis parents pay $155 a year to send their children to High River.¹⁸ In 1912, much to the frustration of the deputy minister of Indian Affairs, sixty-six Métis students were admitted to the school.¹⁹  
In 1913 Indian Affairs gave the Qu’Appelle school a year to replace fifty-one Métis students with First Nation students. Two years later, thirty of the Métis students were still there. In following years, Indian Affairs refused to admit Métis students who did not have status under the Indian Act.²⁰  
The federal government regularly tightened and loosened its Métis admission policy in the system’s early years. Concerns about costs were constantly being balanced against worries that the Métis, without education, would become a public menace. For example, in 1899, Indian Affairs minister Clifford Sifton argued in favour of admitting all children who lived on reserves to the residential schools, since the schools had been “instituted in the public interest, so that there should not grow up upon reserves an uneducated and barbarous class.”²¹ Arguing in the same vein, Qu’Appelle principal Hugonnard warned that the Métis could become a danger to the community if they were not educated, and he attempted to have potential students added to band lists.²²  
By the 1920s, the federal admissions policy for Métis began to tighten permanently. In 1924 Indian Affairs Commissioner W.A. Graham reported that with hard work, he had “got every child out of the Qu’Appelle school who had no right to be there.”²³ In 1934 the word from Ottawa was that “absolutely no half-breed children can be admitted to our schools.”²⁴ In practice, the churches might still admit Métis children, but the federal government would subsidize them only in extreme cases.  
In 1846 an Oblate mission had been established at Île-à-la-Crosse, in what is now Saskatchewan. From 1860 to 1996, Grey Nuns provided a range of educational and health services there, including a residential school for Métis children. Non-Métis children were sent to the Roman Catholic residential school at nearby Beauval.\textsuperscript{25} By 1871 there were twenty-six students in their boarding school, along with five orphans who were being cared for by the Grey Nuns.\textsuperscript{26} Initially, the education at the school was in French, but on her arrival in the early 1870s, Sara Riel introduced English lessons. The Métis opposed the education of their children in English, and demanded that the school be closed. Instead, the English classes were dropped.\textsuperscript{27} In 1874 conditions at the school were so dire that the Grey Nuns had to ask parents to take their children back temporarily because they could not feed them.\textsuperscript{28}

Alphonse Janvier, who attended Île-à-la-Crosse for five years, described it in terms very similar to those used by students of other residential schools. For example, the sexes were strictly segregated. “We were not allowed to intermingle with the females, and many of them that were there had some nieces or nephews. You were not allowed to talk to them because this playground had an imaginary boundary that we could not cross.”\textsuperscript{29}

In 1896 Saint-Paul-des-Métis was established by Father Lacombe as a colony for landless Métis in what is now Alberta. The federal Department of the Interior provided a one-time grant of $2000. When Indian Affairs refused to fund a residential school, the Oblates held a fundraising campaign for a three-storey school that opened in 1903. Angered by what they saw as the school’s harsh discipline, students set the school on fire in 1905. The fire destroyed the entire school, and left one child dead. The school’s destruction marked the beginning of the end of Saint-Paul as a Métis community. By 1908 the federal government decided to terminate the colony, with the blessing of the Board of Management of Saint-Paul, but without consultation with the Métis.\textsuperscript{30} In the following years, most of the Métis who had settled there were displaced by non-Aboriginal settlers.

The Anglican Church established the St. Paul’s residence for Métis children in a private home in Dawson City, Yukon, in 1920. Their parents paid fees to support the residence, and the church and local businesses also made financial contributions. The residence was relocated to a former hospital in 1923 and closed in 1952.\textsuperscript{31}

Aside from these three, in the 1950s the Alberta government began placing (and paying for) Métis children who had been apprehended by child welfare authorities.
in residential schools. The Grouard school, in particular, took in a large number of Métis students during this period. The results of an inspection of the Grouard school by a provincial government psychiatrist in 1958 was so disturbing that the province stopped sending children to the school.

“
We weren’t allowed to speak Cree, only French and English, and for disobeying this, I was pushed into a small closet with no windows or light, and locked in for what seemed like hours.
”

Maria Campbell, former student

The Métis experience in the residential schools was similar to that of other Aboriginal children: poor food, harsh discipline, hard work, and a limited education. In 1914 a Métis woman complained that her children at the High River residential school had gone without boots for three months. That same year, a Saskatchewan lawyer, Arthur Burnett, wrote the department on behalf of a Métis man who complained the High River principal would not let him take his children out of the school for the summer. Métis writer Maria Campbell was seven years old when she was sent to the Beauval residential school in Saskatchewan, largely at the instigation of her grandmother. “We weren’t allowed to speak Cree, only French and English, and for disobeying this, I was pushed into a small closet with no windows or light, and locked in for what seemed like hours.” She did not return after that first year because a day school had opened near her parents’ home.

Raphael Ironstand, a Métis boy from western Manitoba, attended the Pine Creek school, where he was bullied by Cree boys. “They called me ‘Monias,’ while telling me the school was for Indians only. I tried to tell them I was not a Monias, which I now knew meant white man, but a real Indian. That triggered their attack, in unison. I was kicked, punched, bitten, and my hair pulled out by the roots. My clothes were also shredded, but the Crees suddenly disappeared, leaving me lying on the ground, bleeding and bruised.” According to Ironstand, the nuns refused to believe his story, and forced him to mend his clothing.

While it was not unusual for many students to spend a decade in the schools and emerge with only a Grade 2 standing, Archie Larocque, who did not start school at Fort Resolution until his late teens, was grateful for the opportunity to get any education. “They knew I was only going to be there for that one term because I was over the age limit. So they drove all they could into me.” In some cases, Métis parents placed their children in residential school because they could not afford to care for them. But there were also instances of parents undergoing considerable sacrifice to pay for their children’s education. James Thomas, who went to the St. Bernard school for ten years, recalled that it took all the money his father earned to send his children to school. Angie Crerar, who attended Fort Resolution, said the only positive memories she had of residential school were the friendships she formed with other students. “We tried to look after the little ones and tried to avoid some of the beatings that were not necessary. There was no such thing as respect but we taught ourselves to have respect.”

As is the case with many aspects of the residential school story, there is still much to be learned about the experience of Métis people in the residential schools. In particular, there is more to be learned about the degree to which their experiences, and the legacy of those experiences, differ from those of First Nations and Inuit students.