Canadian Residential Schools: The Development and Impact of Canada's Shameful History

One day in 1952, seven-year-old Squamish Sam George walked with his father and three brothers to what he thought would be his grandmother's house. However, they passed her house and walked a couple more blocks, ultimately stopping at St. Paul's Indian Residential School. There, his father went into a separate room to sign papers, and when he was done, told George and his siblings to "be good and listen." He also told the nun to "take care of [his] kids," and then walked away.[1]

George and his brothers were part of thousands of Indigenous children who became victims of the government-funded residential school system, a system whose legacy is the death of an estimated 3,200-30,000 Indigenous students and generational problems, such as increased rates of suicide and drinking in the Indigenous communities. Recent discoveries of numerous unmarked mass graves at the sites of former residential schools have reignited public interest in the Canadian residential school system. Many scholars acknowledge that these schools resulted in a cultural genocide of the Indigenous people that impacted many generations to follow.

Beginning in 1883, Canadian authorities forcibly enrolled more than 150,000 First Nations (Indigenous Canadian people who are not of the Arctic or mixed descent) into these schools, tearing apart families and denying the cultural heritage of generations. The residential school system was a result of colonial ideologies and students suffered physical, mental, and sexual abuse under the guise of assimilation into European culture, leading to a multi-generation trauma that still exists today. Even decades after the last residential school's closure, justice has not yet been brought to the survivors of these schools.

Colonial Relations

The first contact between the Indigenous populations of modern-day Canada and Europeans occurred in the 16th century. As French colonists landed in North America, they laid claims in modern-day Quebec and primarily settled along the Bay of Fundy and east of the St. Lawrence Valley due to the fertile soil and the abundance of fish and game. The area was sparsely populated by Indigenous peoples, allowing for the construction of French forts and trading posts and minimal contact with the Indigenous people. Contact between the groups swelled through the trade of valuables like animal pelts, guns, and alcohol—consequently, the Indigenous population heavily depended on profit from trade and imported European goods. These early interactions between natives and French colonists were a

[1]Seeber, Elisia, "'It wasn't a school. It was a place to kill the Indian in us': Survivor of B.C. residential school shares his story," CTV News Vancouver, last modified July 19, 2021, accessed July 30, 2023, https://bc.ctvnews.ca/it-wasn-t-a-school-it-was-a-place-to-kill-the-indian-in-us-survivor-of-b-c-residential-school-shares-his-story-1.5514874.

microcosm of a more complex and broader relationship developed by extensive European colonization efforts driven by religious beliefs and desires for material wealth.

The "Age of Discovery" is the modern moniker for the era of European colonization of the Americas.[2] Following the discovery of Central and South America in 1492 by Christopher Columbus and news of the wealth generated by Spanish and Portuguese colonies, other European powers, such as the Dutch, the British, and the French, scrambled to carve a claim in the New World. European annexation of land was based on two fundamental concepts:

1) The Christian "God" had given the Christian nations the right to colonize the nations they discovered, as long as they Christianized the original inhabitants

2) Colonists believed they were colonizing the Indigenous population for the natives' benefit by offering them a superior European civilization to the heathens.[3]

The Doctrine of Discovery, issued by the Catholic Church in 1493, was also used to justify colonization in the 16th century.[4] The doctrine granted possession of a non-Christian land to the Christian nation that had first discovered it.[5] The British and French modified the doctrine, positing that "discovery" itself was insufficient; the claims to "discovered" lands were only valid if the discoverer was able to mark them with the raising flags, naming of territories, or building of forts and settlements.[6] This doctrine tied in with the idea of *terra nullius* (Latin for "no man's land"), promoting the idea that all unclaimed territories were up for grabs. In their eyes, Indigenous populations merely occupied land belonging to European powers, as true ownership could only come through European-style agriculture.[7] Since the Indigenous people did not meet this criterion, colonists had the right to take over their land. With these justifications, the French accepted the perceived religious obligation to Christianize the Indigenous population and properly own the land of the New World.

Early Assimilation

Records for the earliest concerted assimilation efforts date to the 1620s. The Recollects, a French religious group, established boarding schools for Indigenous children, believing that they had to be turned into "Frenchmen" before they could be a part of society.[8] Select Indigenous boys were sent to French

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[2]Blakemore, Erin, "Colonial Facts and Information," National Geographic, last modified February 19, 2019, accessed June 3, 2023, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/colonialism?loggedin=true&rnd=1685852997500.
[3]The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, comp., *A Knock on the Door,* 20.
[4]Ibid.
[5]"The Doctrine of Discovery, 1493," The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed June 3, 2023, https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/doctrine-discovery-1493.
[6]The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *A Knock,* 17.
[7]Ibid., 20.
[8]White, Jerry P., and Julie Peters, *A Short History of Aboriginal Education in Canada.* (2009), 13, PDF.

seminaries across Canada to be taught European culture and language; several were even sent on scholarships to France for further assimilation. Post-education, the expectation was that they would assist in converting their community to Christianity in accordance with French customs. This method failed: children could not learn the skills necessary to live amongst their people, cast as a "lost soul" caught between the two cultures.[9] When children returned, they had lost their Indigenous tongue and had missed all the instructions necessary to survive in their tribe. They could not fit into their traditional lifestyle and became outcasts. Even in France, children died due to disease and only a few survived the journey. Despite these consequences, sending Indigenous children to France continued into the 1630s.

Another early effort occurred under the purview of the Jesuits, a different branch of the Catholic Church acting as the main missionary group to France in the 1630s. They followed the Recollect methodology for almost another decade. Father Paul Le Jeune claimed that it was the only practice approach at the time:

> "As to the children of the Savages in this country, there will be some trouble in keeping them [in schools]; I see no other way than that which Your Reverence suggests of sending a child every year to France. Having been there two years, he will return with a knowledge of the language, and having already become accustomed to our ways, he will not leave us and will retain his little countrymen."[10]

However, by 1639, the failures of education for francization became clear and the practice slowly came to an end. Switching tactics, the Jesuits began settling within Indigenous communities and spread Christian doctrines in the regional Indigenous language.[11] This approach was more amenable to the communities and gained the Jesuits the trust of the people; the Jesuits allowed the Indigenous population to maintain their lifestyle and traveled alongside the Indigenous community. However, the Jesuits soon started to view the nomadic lifestyle of the natives as an impediment to the Christianization of the people, concluding that a sedentary lifestyle was necessary in converting them. Reserves were created near French settlements where the missionaries were in close contact and the natives could learn more about the French lifestyle. Along with Christianity, natives were taught agriculture in hopes that they would become self-sufficient farmers. Even these early attempts at assimilation were filled with abuse and coercion. Based on the accounts of Father Jean Pierron, a Jesuit leader, "mildness and force, threats and prayers" were used to instruct and convert children.[12] In addition, the consistent description of Indigenous children as "savages" in the accounts of missionaries is reflective of their attitude.

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[9]Jaenen, Cornelius J, "Education for Francization: The Case of New France in the Seventeenth Century," in *Indian Education in Canada: The Legacy,* ed. by Jean Barman, Yvonne Hebert, and Don McCaskill, 1: 50, PDF.
[10]Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents.* 6: 85. Digital file.
[11]White and Peters, *A Short,* 13.
[12]Jaenen, "Education for Francization," 1: 48.

Initially, Louis XIV, in a letter to the governor of New France in 1665, was willing to acknowledge natives as allies and independent nations, demanding that "the officers, soldiers, and all his other subjects treat the natives with kindness, justice and fairness, without harm or violence," and the French were not to usurp "the lands to which [the Indigenous] were habituated."[13] The king wanted to ensure that French attempts to convert the natives to Catholicism were done with respect rather than with force due to the belief in rights based on former occupation. These instructions were kept as the French Crown recognized the Indigenous groups as independent nations with their systems and cultures. Further royal instructions forbade the clearing and settling west of the Montreal region seigneuries. In other areas, settlers first requested the permission of the Indigenous population before establishing forts and settlements. The French also maintained alliances with surrounding tribes, continuing relations developed during the fur trade. However, Their biggest threat was the Iroquois, a confederation of tribes in upstate New York backed by the British. The Iroquois not only wanted to expand their territory but also sought revenge for family members who had died due to diseases brought by French colonists. This caused a series of battles between rival tribes and their European allies. Hence, the 17th century strengthened the relationships between the Indigenous population and the colonists.

Canada under British Colonial Rule

In 1763, French territories in Canada were handed over to the British following their victory in the French and Indian War. King George III of the United Kingdom issued the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which prohibited settlers from directly claiming land from the Indigenous people. Only land bought by the Crown from the First Nations and then sold to settlers could be claimed. This proclamation was beneficial for the natives as it prevented settlers from claiming Indigenous land unless it was through the government, frequently through treaties. As territories expanded, provisions were made in the treaties to reserve a part of the surrendered land for the usage of the natives who had lived there. Initially, the British desired to maintain peaceful relationships with the Natives; however, the belief in cultural supremacy of the British officials led to changes in their relationship.

The Indigenous population in Canada played an important role in defending British territories from invading American forces, during the War of 1812, fought between the United States and the United Kingdom with their respective Indigenous allies. They served in the military alongside British soldiers and fought alongside British soldiers during the wars, which helped Indigenous soldiers gain respect within the military. However, after the end of the war, the responsibility for interactions with Indigenous

[13]"Instructions Pour Le Sieur De Courcelles Au Suject Des Indiens," in *Collection De Manuscrits*. National Library and Archives of Quebec. Digital file.

communities changed from military officials, who were sympathetic to their culture and customs, to civilian representatives, who were only concerned with the permanent colonial settlement. With the threat of American forces gone and a larger population to meet defensive needs, British settlers started to view Indigenous communities as obstacles to permanent settlement. The British government began to regard First Nations as wards rather than allies. Officials believed in cultural supremacy and viewed the natives as in need of a proper civilization. Education efforts by missionaries to convert the natives into "proper Europeans" through schools and reserves continued.

Governor General Charles Bagot commissioned the Bagot Commission report in 1842, which recommended the establishment of residential schools to separate children from their parents to civilize them.[14] This was the first time the Canadian government's Department of Indian Affairs officially encouraged the growth of the residential school system for the sake of assimilation. Egerton Ryerson, a prominent education reformist in Canada gave his ideas on the "best method of establishing and conducting Industrial Schools for the benefit of the aboriginal Indian Tribes," under the request of the assistant superintendent general of Indian Affairs.[15] (Aboriginal is a collective name for the original peoples of North America and their descendants). In his 1847 report, Ryerson stated that the Indigenous children had to be educated in separate, denominational English-only schools[16]:

> "…it is a fact established by numerous experiments, that the North American Indian cannot be civilized or preserved in a state of civilization (including habits of industry and sobriety) except in connection with, if not by the influence of, not only religious instruction and sentiment but of religious feeling."[17]

Ryerson's report reflected the contemporary public consensus: only conversion to Christianity could civilize the backward indigenous peoples. While Ryerson's personal responsibility in the creation of residential schools remains contested, his report undoubtedly led to the creation of several new Methodist-run schools in Ontario in the 1850s.[18]

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[14]"Report on the Affairs of the Indians in Canada: Laid before the Legislative Assembly, 20th March 1845," Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre Collections, accessed June 21, 2023, https://collections.irshdc.ubc.ca/index.php/Detail/objects/9431.

[15]Ryerson, Egerton. *Report of Dr. Ryerson on Industrial Schools,* 73, PDF

[16]Knight, Hunter, "Egerton Ryerson: Racist Philosophy of Residential Schools Also Shaped Public Education," The Conversation, accessed June 22, 2023, https://theconversation.com/egerton-ryerson-racist-philosophy-of-residential-schools-also-shaped-public-education-143039.

[17]Ryerson, *Report of Dr. Ryerson,* 7.

[18]Stuart Thomson, "Timeline: Residential Schools Stretch Across Canada's Entire History," The Hub, last modified June 10, 2021, accessed June 26, 2023, https://thehub.ca/2021-06-10/timeline-residential-schools-stretch-across-canadas-entire-history/.

This period also brought about changes in the legislature regarding the Indigenous population. In the 1850s and 1860s, the government passed a series of acts to assimilate the Indigenous population, such as the Gradual Civilization Act. Requirements based on blood for legal "Indian" status were established. Acts aimed at removing any special distinction or rights of First Nations people as an independent through voluntary enfranchisement, and therefore Canadian citizenship, were also passed. These laws were passed due to a growing desire of the government to reduce the number of natives they were financially responsible for. As a separate nation, the Indigenous communities had signed treaties with the government to give up their land in return for educational funds and food. The government assumed that First Nations young men would be eager to become "full British citizens." Despite this offer, only one single man out of the approximate 125,000 First Nations people voluntarily enfranchised, revealing the Indigenous peoples' desire to maintain their own separate identity.[19]

Eventually, these acts were consolidated into the Indian Act of 1876, which gave greater authority to the Department of Indian Affairs (hereafter referred to as Indian Affairs). Under the act, the Department was able to determine who was an Indian, manage Indian lands, and promote civilization. Aboriginal people who registered under the Indian Act were given special benefits and rights such as being exempt from paying taxes. Status was passed along patrilineally, conflicting with the matrilineal cultures of many First Nations clans. Indigenous women could lose their status through marriage, but men did not, rousing controversy about gender discrimination. This act also contained policies intended to end the cultural, social, economic, and political distinctiveness of Indigenous peoples by dismantling traditional systems of government. By replacing traditional structures of governance with band council elections, hereditary chiefs lost their legal recognition.

Creation of Government Residential Schools

Following these developments, the focus of the government shifted towards educating the First Nations to be self-sustaining. In 1878, J.S. Dennis, the deputy minister of the Department of the Interior, advised Prime Minister John Macdonald that the long-term goal of residential schools should be to instruct the Indigenous population on agriculture and trade.[20] In 1879, the federal government sent Nicholas Flood Davin to investigate the industrial schools in the United States and the wisdom of implementing similar schools in Canada.[21] In the 1879 Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-Breeds, Davin proposed that schools should be funded by the federal government and run by

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[19]"Indian Act and Enfranchisement of Indigenous Peoples," Indigenous Corporate Training Inc, last modified September 1, 2016, accessed June 9, 2023, https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indian-act-and-enfranchisement-of-indigenous-people

[20]The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *A Knock,* 62.

[21]Davin, Nicholas Flood, *Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-Breeds,* 1, PDF.

religious denominations; the government would provide facilities and maintenance, while churches provided teachers and curriculum. Schools following this model were established across Canada starting in the 1880s. Davin also recommended that "if anything is to be done with the Indian, [officials] must catch him very young. The children must be kept constantly within the circle of civilized conditions."[22] Davin claimed that day schools were inefficient as the children returned to their homes every day and were continuously exposed to their Indigenous culture, diminishing the efforts of the schools. Instead, Davin advised that assimilation and Christianization of children could only be achieved by completely separating children from their parents and culture from an early age.

Based on Davin's report, the Canadian government established three industrial schools in the early 1880s. Initially, student recruitment proved difficult, and only twenty-seven students were in attendance across the three schools.[23] In 1894, an amendment made to the Indian Act mandated the attendance of these schools by First Nation children between the ages of seven and sixteen. These industrial schools were initially different from church-run boarding schools; industrial schools were much larger, located in urban areas, and, although church-managed, usually required federal approval prior to construction.[24] Over time, these differences diminished, and by the 1920s, the federal government ceased to make any distinction between the two institutions, referring to both as residential schools.[25]

Initially, the federal government covered all the costs of operating the industrial schools which were expected to be nearly cost-free because of the forced labor of the students and the poorly paid missionaries. The students would provide cheap labor to make the school self-sustaining, revealing that the government never truly desired to solely educate the students. However, this dream of self-sustainment was never accomplished and in 1891, the government switched to a policy that granted schools a fixed amount per student. This funding motivated school officials to enter students who should not have been admitted because they were too sick or young.[26]

Stripping of Culture and Identity

"Save the Man, Kill the Indian," and "Kill the Indian in the Child" were slogans that surmised the goals of residential schools. To cleanse the child of their "Indian" evils, culturally significant aspects of the children's identity were immediately taken away at the residential schools. Upon their arrival at

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[22]Ibid., 12

[23]*Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs*, (Library of Archives Canada, 1884), digital file.

[24]The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 57.

[25]Ibid.

[26] *Report by Dr. P.H. Bryce on His Tour of Inspection of Indian Schools in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta.* (Library and Archives Canada, 1907), Digital file.

residential schools, the children were forced to exchange their clothes for school-supplied clothing, stripping them of homemade clothing and the value it carried.[27] Some schools also cut the students' hair, another important aspect of Indigenous culture.

Language was another cultural element taken away by the staff. Officials believed that the continued use of Indigenous language was detrimental to the assimilation of the children. Infractions, like the usage of the Indigenous language, were punished by whipping or beatings, instilling fear within the children. Additionally, this policy was harmful to family relations; children who returned home for the holidays or after graduation could not communicate with their families. This divide led to difficulty conveying the abuse they faced. Since many Indigenous children did not speak or understand English or French and were often punished for it, school life was dominated by fear.[28] Separation of siblings further isolated students: Bernice Jacks was separated from her older sister and scolded when she slipped into the older girls' dormitory, while Bernard Catcheway was separated from his sister and wasn't allowed to communicate with her.[29] Brothers and sisters were taken to different parts of the school and learned different trade jobs. Older and younger siblings had to sleep in different dormitories.[30] Separation from family members added to the loneliness of the students. In schools full of isolation, it was difficult for the students to receive any affection or practice any cultural rituals. Cultural identities were further stripped through the blotting of Indigenous names

In these schools, students lost their original names; the staff often changed their names to a European name or simply assigned a number, further stripping away any identity from them. These numbers were printed on their clothing and school supplies. Numbering the students was an attempt to detach the children from their families and culture. A survivor, Gilles Petiquat, still remembers the numbers he was called: "I had [my first 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."[31] Numbering the students contributed to the belief that these students were lesser human beings, an idea that was also reflected in the education the students received.

Education and Work

In his 1847 report, Ryerson also recommended that Indigenous students should be educated in "the English language, arithmetic, elementary geometry, geography and the elements of general history, natural history and agricultural chemistry, writing, drawing and vocal music, bookkeeping, religion and

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[27]The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 37.
[28]Ibid, 41
[29]Bernice Jacks, interview, Victoria, British Columbia, March 6, 2013.
[30]The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 41.
[31]Gilles Petiquay, interview, La Tuque, Québec, March 6, 2013.

morals."[32] Ryerson desired to educate the natives agriculturally to later become agricultural workers. However, the quality of education in residential schools did not meet the expectation of many families. A former principal said"that when [children] return to the Reserves they have not enough education to enable them to transact ordinary business—scarcely enough to enable them to write a legible letter."[33] Teachers and staff members had low expectations of the students to succeed in learning. A principal wrote in 1883 that "[the children] lack great mental capacity," and it would not be wise to expect them to "be equal in every respect to their white brethren."[34] Staff believed that the Indigenous children were lesser than Europeans and could not reach the same level. Altogether, there was no expectation for the students to succeed in learning. As a result, lessons were devoted to memorization and repetition. Children did not develop "any deductive power," and were "altogether too parrot like and lacking expression."[35] Additionally, teachers were often not qualified to teach and were poorly paid.

The education content was developed by provincial education departments, often consisting of criticizing and shaming the students' culture and history. Textbooks used by the schools included images that portrayed the Indigenous populations as savages and bloodthirsty. To many, the curriculum was alienating as many could not identify with the contents of the classroom materials.[36] In addition, religious training often took priority over regular education to "counteract the evil tendencies of the Indian nature."[37] Each school required children to pray and attend church, as conversion was more important than the acquisition of skills.

To fulfill the dream of a self-sustaining school, students were also expected to grow and prepare the food they ate, make and repair their clothing, and maintain the schools.[38] Many schools operated under a system known as the "half-day" system: students would be in class for half a day while the other half would be devoted to vocational training.[39] However, the "vocational training" was little more than repetitive and dangerous labor to maintain school operations. Boys were often put into workshops while girls worked in the kitchen or did laundry. This system was not a national mandate and many schools implemented it on their own basis, showing how the schools were haphazardly managed by the government. Although this "vocational training" was meant to occupy half a day, many students had chores to complete before and after class, resulting in further encroachments upon the student's education.

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[32]Ryerson, *Report of Dr. Ryerson*.
[33]R.B.Heron, *Headquarters—General Education Policy—Presbyterian Church (Library and Archives Canada, 1923), digital file.*
[34]*Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs*, (Library of Archives Canada, 1883), 96, digital file.
[35]J. D. McLean, *Blood Agency—Blood Roman Catholic Boarding School—General Administration* (Library and Archives Canada, 1915), digital file
[36] The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 76.
[37]*Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs*, (Library of Archives Canada, 1903), 342–343, digital file.
[38]The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 77.
[39]Ibid., 77-78.

The students were poorly supervised and often put in harm's way, resulting in numerous injuries. Principals and teachers tended to blame the student and neglected to report such injuries to the government. For instance, when a mangle, a clothes wringer, crushed several fingers on Florence MsLeod's right hand, requiring amputation, Indian Affairs secretary A. F. MacKenzie concluded that "all necessary precautions were taken and… it was through no fault of the school management."[40] Both the school and the government failed to protect the students by refusing to acknowledge such claims. The tendency to refuse to accept their wrongdoing and properly report incidents revealed the lack of care the staff had to take care of the students placed under their care. This problem also manifested in the schools' response to health crises.

Health Problems

"I was always hungry" was a common phrase in survivors' testimonies. Students were served meager meals, typically porridge, bread, or watery soup.[41] Meat, jam, and butter were only for special occasions, leaving the students' diets bereft of nutrients. In 1918, an Indian agent, a representative of the government to the First Nations, John Smith reported "suspicion that the vitality of the children is not sufficiently sustained from a lack of nutritious food, or enough of the same for vigorous growing children."[42] The lack of food forced the students, particularly the older ones, to resort to alternatives to improve their diet, such as trapping and cooking wild animals from the surrounding land or stealing from the school. A former student from Manitoba, a Canadian province, recounted "trying to be wise, trying to help the little girls however I could by stealing food from the kitchen. I learned how to sew so I made bigger pockets so I could fit more food in them."[43]

In addition, the transition from the traditional Indigenous diet to one consisting of porridge and bread distressed the students.[44] Students who had grown up on traditional food sources: wild meats, fish, foraged roots and berries, and traditional agricultural products[45] Although traditional food was cooked, they were often cooked in a way that was unappetizing and different to the students. Due to the shock and condition of the food, students commonly fell ill or rejected the food.[46] However, complaints were not

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[40]A. F. MacKenzie, *File Hills Qu'Appelle Agency—Qu'Appelle Residential School —General Administration* (Library and Archive Canada, 1936), digital file.
[41]The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 85-86.
[42]John F. Smith, *Kamloops Agency—General Correspondence Pertaining to the Kamloops Industrial School* (Library and Archives Canada, 1918), digital file.
[43]Tricia Logan, "Abuse, Neglect, Resistance," in *Indian Residential Schools, Settler Colonialism and Their Narratives in Canadian History*, 171, digital file.
[44]Ibid., 171.
[45]Ibid.
[46]Ibid., 173.

tolerated since the students were supposed to model "good white children."[47] Vomiting during their meals was met with punishment—having to eat the vomit and refusing to do so only brought more abuse.[48] Despite the threats, some students found ways to steal or discreetly dispose of the food, building a form of resistance against the system.

This issue was amplified by the contrast between the food quality of the staff and the students. According to accounts from various former students, the staff had their own dining rooms with "nice silver trays and teapots and coffee urns," along with "special meals" such as bacon and eggs, roast beef, or pork chops. In contrast, the students were given "one piece of bologna and a couple of slices of bread."[49] The food served to students was often rotten or infested with maggots, worms, insects, and rodents. While not every school engaged in such egregious maltreatment, the abundance of food given to staff reveals that some schools *did* get enough funding for food but chose to give the students a monotonous and unhealthy diet.

Malnutrition led to another health crisis: disease. Malnourished students were highly susceptible to disease and the living conditions of the residential schools only aggravated the situation. The schools were "hurriedly constructed of poor materials, badly laid out, without due provision for lighting, heating or ventilation…drainage was poor, and water and fuel supplies were inadequate."[50] The lack of clean water, sanitation, and adequate ventilation made these schools a breeding ground for a wide range of diseases. Indians Affairs chief medical officer Dr. Bryce described the "tuberculosis cycle," in which children would get sick at home, infect other children at residential schools, and spread the disease in their community when they returned home.[51] Even those who recovered were left weakened and were susceptible to other diseases such as smallpox or measles. Additionally, schools often lacked proper facilities to deal with sickness, furthering the spread of disease.[52] Tuberculosis became the leading cause of death in residential schools, averaging 8,000 deaths per 100,000 children, compared to 51-79 deaths per 100,000 in the general population.[53] In 1910, the Canadian government addressed the situation with a contract between the Department of Indian Affairs and the schools: the government increased school grants and established regulations for student diet and school ventilation. While a positive short-term

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[47]Ibid., 171.
[48]Ibid., 173-174
[49]Ibid., 178
[50]Martin Benson, *Headquarters—Church Schools—General Administration—Policy—Education* (Library and Archives Canada, 1987), digital file.
[51]Peter Bryce, *Report on the Indian Schools of Manitoba and the North-West Territories* (Ottawa, 1907), digital file
[52]The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 97-98.
[53]Heffernan, C., G. Ferrara, and R. Long, "Reflecting on the Relationship between Residential Schools and TB in Canada," National Library of Medicine, last modified September 2022, accessed June 30, 2023, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9423017/.

impact was seen, grants were cut off during the Great Depression, leading to underfunding and worse conditions within the schools. This health crisis within the schools was a microcosm of the afflictions ravaging the larger Indigenous community. On reserves, housing was often poor and crowded, sanitation inadequate, and clean water access limited, allowing diseases to flourish. Of course, Indian Affairs officials were aware that the mortality rates among the Indigenous population were disproportionally high, regardless of location.[54] However, the Canadian government never prioritized general Indigenous health and no long-term investments were made in Indigenous health.[55] By failing to take proper measures, the Canadian government condemned the Indigenous people to generations of poor health.

This negligence and abuse resulted in a staggering death toll. In 1907, Dr. Peter Bryce reported that 25% of all children died, and at one school, it was as high as 69%. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, a national committee established in 2006 focused on uncovering the truth about residential schools, a total of 3,200 students died at the schools. However, other historians argue that the death toll may be as high as 30,000. The true number of student deaths will likely remain unknown due to the incompleteness of records.[56]According to a 1935 federal government policy, school records could be destroyed after five years, and records of accidents after ten years.[57] Reports by doctors, dentists, and nurses were retained for two years.[58] There is no guarantee that school officials reported deaths to Indian Affairs, meaning that even their records may be deficient.

The general doctrine at the time was to hold the school responsible for the burial expenses when a student died; parental requests to have the bodies returned home were often denied due to being costly. Children were buried in a nearby cemetery, graves marked by a white cross. The remaining students often had to dig graves for their classmates. As schools closed, these cemeteries were abandoned and forgotten.

Abuse and Mistreatment

"[W]hen I first got hit by the nuns, it was really devastating because how can they hit me when my parents didn't hit me?"[59] Isabelle Whitford's words were a shared sentiment among residential school students. Flogging, beatings, and confinement were common disciplinary actions within the residential school system. After a report by an Indian agent on the severity of the discipline, Indian Affairs Deputy Minister Hayter Reed directed his staff:

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[54]The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 99.
[55]Ibid.
[56]Ian Mosby and Erin Millions, "Canada's Residential Schools Were a Horror," *Scientific American*, accessed July 28, 2023, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/canadas-residential-schools-were-a-horror/.
[57]The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 90.
[58]Ibid.
[59]Isabelle Whitford, interview, Manitoba, May 28, 2010.

> "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 offenses and as a deterrent example."[60]

Reed's directive underlines the recurrent problems with Indian Affairs' approach to regulating discipline in residential schools. First, the directions were vague: it does not specify where students could not be struck or place limits on with what and how many times students could be struck. Secondly, it is not clear if these instructions were given to the principals. Even if they were, there was no evidence that principals ever followed these rules; they were soon forgotten and no further references were made to this policy. The failure to establish and enforce a national policy meant that students were subject to disciplinary measures that would not be tolerated in general schools.[61] This violence was furthered by the staff's dehumanizing attitude toward the students.

Evidence for a wide variety of harsh and cruel punishments is abundant. Students who had been caught using their traditional language or going against the strict system established by the school were subject to severe beatings or flogging on the back and hands by the nuns and priests. In one case, the principal was accused of shackling a boy to his bead and beating him with a riding whip until his back bled. Another account states that a teacher broke a ruler while hitting a student's hands. Other punishments included being pulled by the ear or hit in the face, which impaired some students' hearing; being forced to stand outside during the winter without adequate clothing; being locked up in dormitories, broom closets, basements, and crawl spaces; and being publicly humiliated.[62] In one school, there was an electric chair in the basement which staff members would use as punishment and for their own amusement. Abusive treatment, along with the condition of the food and rampant disease, prompted children to run away, but many died of exposure or were captured and taken back to their schools to face punishment. Runaways would have their hair shaved off and would be left in confinement with minimal food. This violent discipline often came as a shock to the students, many of whom had never been disciplined at home.Sexual abuse was rampant since the creation of the first residential schools. Students of all ages and genders were fondled and molested by various staff members. Predatory behavior was commonplace, as staff members showed students kindness and gave them treats, and later abused them. Former student John Jones testified to being sexually abused by a supervisor after going to his office to

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[60]The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 101.
[61]Ibid., 102.
[62]Ibid., 111.

receive chocolate.[63] Girls were touched inappropriately while sitting on the laps of teachers, and some staff members watched students shower. Moreover, the greatest source of fear came during the night when nuns or priests would come into the dormitory and touch the sleeping children or take them to their own offices to molest, or even sometimes rape them. Students were either threatened or given treats to keep them silent. Some older students fought back against their abusers, fighting, screaming, and feigning insanity to get away.

Staff abuse also led to abuse between students. Violent social hierarchies would form, and bullies would terrorize vulnerable students. Victims would be forced to give up their money or food or be forced to steal or engage in sexual activities. Students are also organized into groups based on age, the community of origin, or First Nation, giving them a sense of identity, status, and protection.[64] Evelyn Korkmaz, a former student from Ontario, told her story of how she was repeatedly gang raped by the boys at her school. Upon recollection, she "wonder[s], if a priest or nun did not abuse that guy who raped me, or those guys who raped me, maybe I wouldn't have gotten raped."[65] The staff's abuse of children starved of affection allowed the students to treat their peers similarly.

The truth about sexual abuse at these schools was hard to accept for many families, especially those who had accepted Christianity and regarded the staff as representatives of God. It was difficult to understand that such people who had promised to protect their children could commit such heinous acts against the students. The refusal to believe their children led to further division within families and isolated the children in their despair and pain. Victims were also young and did not understand what had happened to them at that time; oftentimes, the students were told that they were to blame for the abuse. Sexual abuse often left students confused and subject to humiliation from their peers. Many students believed that they were alone in enduring the abuse, making it more difficult to speak up. Even when the abuse was reported, action from school officials against the abuse was sporadic. Indian Affairs officials would often tell the staff member under investigation to leave the school to avoid legal persecution. Stigmatization of sexual abuse within the community made it difficult for survivors to talk about their experiences even after residential schools closed.

Clearly, there were no limits on what could be done to the Indigenous children within residential schools due to the lack of enforceable regulations. Even when abuses were reported, minimal action was taken to investigate these reports. Indian Affairs and the churches prioritized their interests and covered

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[63]*On Point*, "Stories from Canada's Indigenous Residential School Survivors," produced by Jonathan Chang and Tim Skoog, hosted by Meghna Chakrabarti, aired July 28, 2021, accessed June 26, 2023, https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2021/07/28/stories-from-survivors-of-canadas-indigenous-residential-schools.
[64]The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 109.
[65]"Three Residential School Survivors and the Brutality That Shaped Their Lives," *KCI-NIWESQ*, no. 5 (August 2021)

up the incidents, failing to meet their responsibility of providing protection, and education, for the students.

Resistance

Expectedly, residential schools faced resistance from both the parents and the students. Parents called for the government to increase funding, establish day schools closer to their reserves, and improve the quality of education and lifestyle within the schools. Indian Affairs viewed parental influences on their children to be negative and backward and suspected them of encouraging their children to rebel against the system.[66] Finding their voices primarily ignored by the government, families found more direct ways to resist the system. revealing a fundamental problem where First Nations parents did not have control over their child's education

Acts of resistance largely centered around keeping students from being within the reach of the residential school. Before attendance became compulsory in 1920, the primary method was to refuse to enroll children. The shortages in attendance limited the school's income through government per-capita grants and student labor, leading to schools closing down. In some cases, parents came into the schools and took their children out of school against the wishes of the principal. In 1904, after Principal G. Donckele claimed that a father had signed away his rights over his daughter to the government, the father said, "I am the father of this child and I do not care for what you and the government have to say about it."[67] It was also not uncommon for families or even entire communities to refuse to send back the children after breaks. In the fall of 1926, communities in Manitoba's Interlake region announced that they would not return the children, who were poorly fed and clothed.[68] In other instances, after witnessing the impact of the school's "education" on their children, parents refused to send back their children and even petitioned for the removal of principals, which were largely unsuccessful.[69] The refusal to acknowledge the parents' protests revealed the lack of care the schools had for the education lifestyle provided to the students. The resistance of the parents displayed their desire to protect their children and maintain their identity.

Students were also active in resisting the system. To bring an end to their suffering, students attempted to burn down their schools: thirty-seven such attempts occurred. Although highly risky, running

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[66]The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 114.
[67]G. Donckele, *Cowichan Agency—Incoming Correspondence re Kuper Island Industrial School* (Library and Archives Canada, 1906), digital file.
[68]A. Ogletree, *Elkhorn Residential School—Church of England—General Administration—Building Maintenance—Supplies—Accounts* (Library and Archives Canada, 1926), digital file.
[69]Chief Kesik and Chief Redsky, *Kenora Agency—Cecilia Jeffrey Residential School—Presbyterian—General Administration—Supplies* (Library and Archives Canada, 1917), digital file.

away proved to be an effective method.[70] Many children died of exposure or got lost and were never found. The earliest nationwide policy regarding runaway children was established in 1953, which stated, "The principal shall take prompt action to effect the return to school of any truant pupil, and shall report promptly to the Superintendent, Indian Agency, every case of truancy."[71] The definition of prompt action was under defined and no requirement to contact the police or the parents was in place. The vague policy highlights the lack of care the government had to ensure the safety and survival of the students.

The resistance of First Nation parents and their children to the attack against their communities and families proved that they desired to maintain their autonomy and protect each other. However, they were still mainly forbidden to control education, leaving the root issue unresolved.

Even with the rampant abuse and dehumanization of the system, some students were able to find hope in staff members. Starting in the 1960s, former students were able to gain staff positions within residential schools, many of whom strived to create a better environment for the students. Over time, they managed to challenge disciplinary methods and improved the quality of food available.[72] Additionally, Former staff and their children expressed their belief that people have overlooked the positive intent teachers had; many staff members spend their adult lives working in residential schools and taking care of the Aboriginal students.[73] The teachers received very low wages for their work in residential schools and were also subject to the same diseases and conditions as the Indigenous students. Former students also remember teachers that have made a positive impact on their education or their life in the schools. Sometimes, the staff protested against the treatment of the students while others tried to humanize the inhumane system.[74] Overall, the staff was not responsible for policies that separated children from their families and lodged them in inadequate facilities: in fact, many spend their time caring for and devoting their lives to the students.

Closing Down

In June of 1968, the Canadian government took direct control over all the schools and issued the *Statement on Indian Policy*.[75] This policy proposed to transfer the responsibility of managing the Indigenous population from the Canadian government to the provincial government, called for the repeal

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[70]The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 118.
[71]*Regulations With Respect to Teaching, Education, Inspection, and Discipline for Indian Residential Schools, Made and Established for the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs Pursuant to Paragraph (a) of Section 114 of the Indian Act,* (IRS Historical Files Collection, 1917), digital file
[72]The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 127- 128.
[73]Ibid., 128
[74]Ibid., 129
[75]*Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy* (1969), 20, PDF

of the Indian Act and the end of the Department of Indian Affairs.[76] However, the Aboriginal community fiercely protested this policy, and it was abandoned. In 1969, the Department of Indian Affairs ended its partnership with the churches and took sole control of the residential school system.[77] The federal government attempted to end segregation by incorporating Indigenous students into public schools. However, many struggled to adjust to the new system and faced discrimination from their peers. Starting in 1969, the government started to close down the entire residential school system. In 1970, there were fifty-six remaining schools; in 1980, sixteen remained.[78] From the 1960s to late 1980s, the purpose of residential school minorly shifted. More than half of the students in residential schools were placed there for welfare reasons. Due to the enduring sentiment that Aboriginal parents are unfit to take care of their children, thousands of Indigenous children were taken away from their homes and put into child welfare programs.[79] As a result, the residential school system was replaced with the "Sixties Scoop." Of course, the abuse did not subside with this transition and remained ubiquitous in the lives of the students, and their education remained neglected. By 1999, no residential school remained in operation.

Lasting Impact

Residential schools scarred the students and the communities they "served" for generations. The leading cause of death for former students was substance abuse and suicide. Compared to the general population, Indigenous women were eight times more likely to commit suicide while men were five times as likely to commit suicide.[80] Students were left in poorer general health and increased susceptibility to chronic and infectious diseases due to frequent illness and malnutrition. The residential school system helped tuberculosis remain endemic in the Indigenous community. Mental and emotional health were also severely affected due to the constant abuse and neglect they endured. Common effects included mental distress, depression, addictive behaviors and substance misuse, stress, and suicidal behaviors. The abuse inflicted on the children at a young age stayed with survivors and negatively impacted their adult life as well. Taken from their homes at an early age and often shown little love, former students had difficulty building and maintaining families and social lives. Having grown up in an environment where figures of authority regularly abused, coerced, and threatened, former students lacked proper social and parenting skills. The abuse they suffered repeated in their homes, creating a repeating cycle of abuse; former students displayed violent behaviors to their children, who in turn would act the same to their children. As

[76]The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 69-70.
[77]Hanson, Erin, Daniel P. Games, and Alexa Manuel. "The Residential School System." Indigenous Foundations. Accessed June 29, 2023. https://Indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_residential_school_system/.
[78]Ibid.
[79]Ibid.
[80]Rice, Kylie, "Residential Schools and Their Lasting Impacts," The Indigenous Foundation, accessed June 28, 2023, https://www.theindigenousfoundation.org/articles/residential-schools-their-lasting-impacts.

generations of families passed through residential schools, the abusive behavior remained on a positive feedback loop. Substance addictions and suicidal tendencies also impacted family relations and communities. Children whose parents or grandparents attended schools were more likely to have considered suicide at some time in their life and had higher rates of drinking and drug use, including marijuana and opioids.[81] Over time, these issues hacked away at the Indigenous population and their culture.

As the schools stole the children away during a period crucial to the acquisition of cultural elements, such as language and customs, the knowledge of heritage in each Indigenous generation declined. Even former students in staffing positions were forbidden from teaching their language, resulting in 70 percent of the 90 surviving Indigenous languages being considered to be endangered today.[82] Modern government policies are attempting to preserve these languages, but it is estimated that one language dies approximately every two weeks. Within the Indigenous community, there is still an ongoing struggle to reclaim their lost heritage. Beaten for using their language, former students were unwilling or unable to teach their children their native language: as a result,

Poor education has also hampered the ability of adult Aboriginals to find employment. The main emphasis of the education was on making the school self-sustaining; even at the age of 18, many students had only finished fourth or fifth-grade level education. Lacking basic reading and writing skills, former students had difficulty finding employment and are often employed in lower-paying jobs and have a lower standard of living.[83] Although the schools' main goal was to make the Natives self-sufficient, the education provided was deficient and currently, many Indigenous communities struggle to become independent, relying on the government for many aspects of their life.

Reconciliation

Starting in the 1980s, former students launched campaigns to force the Canadian government and churches to recognize the crimes wrought by the residential school system on Indigenous communities. Former students have filed lawsuits against the churches and government regarding the abuse they suffered during their time at residential schools. By the 1990s, significant information regarding the tragic events in these schools was available to the public.

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[81]Rabson, Mia. "Residential School Survivors and Their Descendants Show Poorer Health Outcomes: Survey." CBC News. Last modified March 14, 2018. Accessed June 28, 2023. https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/residential-school-health-survey-1.4576430.

[82]"Losing My Language." Portage la Prairie Community Revitalization Corporation. Last modified June 1, 2021. Accessed June 28, 2023. https://www.portagecrc.com/post/losing-my-language.

[83]Rice, "Residential Schools,." The Indigenous Foundation.

In 1991, the Canadian government established the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples to investigate the relationship between the Indigenous people and the government throughout the whole colonization era and held hearings across the nation with those affected by the residential school system.[84] This commission brought unprecedented attention from non-Indigenous people to the residential school system and advised on how to manage relations through its 1996 report. In 1998, under the recommendation of the commission, the Canadian government gave a public apology to former students for the abuse they suffered.[85] The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) was established in 2006 through discussions between representatives of former students, the Assembly of First Nations, other Indigenous organizations, churches, and the federal government.[86] Under the IRSSA, $1.9 billion was set aside as compensation for all eligible former students.

Another key component under the IRSSA was the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC). The TRC was established in 2006 and investigated the residential school system and heard from more than 7,000 survivors. They also investigated the numerous lawsuits against the government. In all, they discovered more than 1,300 unmarked graves at the site of four former residential schools in western Canada. The discovery reignited public interest in the topic. The TRC concluded, in their final report in 2015, that more than 3,000 children died from disease due to overcrowding, malnutrition, poor sanitation, abuse, or trying to run away.[87] In their description, "child neglect was institutionalized" at these schools, the staff was poorly trained, and there was limited supervision over the operation of the schools.[88]

Former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, as a representative of the government, issued a public apology in 2008; he states the system "had a lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage, and language" and apologized "for Canada's role in the Indian Residential School system."[89] This apology was met with various responses; some believed that it was a starting point in healing relations between Indigenous peoples and the government. Others believed that the apology fell short and was merely symbolic. First Nations leaders acknowledged that although apologies are a step in the process of

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[84]"The Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement." The University of British Columbia. Accessed June 26, 2023. https://irshdc.ubc.ca/learn/the-indian-residential-school-settlement-agreement/.

[85]Ibid.

[86]de Bruin, Tabitha. "Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement." The Canadian Encyclopedia. Last modified July 11, 2013. Accessed June 20, 2023. https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/indian-residential-schools-settlement-agreement.

[87]*60 Minutes*. "The Dark Legacy of Canada's Residential Schools, Where Thousands of Children Died." Hosted by Anderson Cooper.

[88]Ibid.

[89]Statement of Apology to Former Students of Indian Residential Schools." Government of Canada. Accessed July 3, 2023. https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1571589171655.

reconciliation, these gestures are not enough without supportive action. For recompensation, the Canadian government set up a $1.9 billion compensation fund for the 86,000 eligible survivors and their families.[90]

After continued pressure from the Indigenous community, Pope Francis, on July 25, 2022, as a representative of the church also apologized for "the ways in which many Christians supported the colonization mentality of the powers that oppressed the Indigenous peoples" and asked for forgiveness "for the ways in which many members of the church and religious communities cooperated, not least through their indifference, in projects of cultural destruction and forced assimilation promoted by the governments of that time, which culminated in the system of residential schools."[91] Through his apology, the pope admitted that these schools resulted in "cultural destruction," and the erasure of Indigenous autonomy. The apology was also noted for its omission of the unmarked graves and of the Doctrine of Discovery, which many people hoped Pope Francis would acknowledge. Some also felt that by apologizing on behalf of Christians, the Pope trivialized the role of the Catholic Church as a whole in the development of the system.

Conclusion

The impact of residential schools on its students, the Indigenous community, and the modern-day Indigenous population proves that attempts by Canada's federal government to assimilate Indigenous children were harmful and did not accomplish anything. The TRC's 2015 report suggested 94 Calls To Action designed to "advance the process of Canadian reconciliation."[92] These Calls To Action include legacy aspects such as education, language and culture, child welfare, justice, and missing children; it also contains advice on promoting reconciliation through media or sports.[93] As of September 2021, 13 Calls To Action have been completed, 31 have projects underway, 32 have projects proposed, and 18 have not yet been started.[94] It is important to keep in mind that these projects require collaborative efforts from the government, institutions, and the general public.

Aside from the Calls To Action, the government has been making efforts at recognizing and commemorating the victims, implementing healing programs, acknowledging traditional land claims, and educating the public about the history and perspective of the Indigenous population on residential schools.

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[90]*60 Minutes*. "The Dark Legacy of Canada's Residential Schools, Where Thousands of Children Died." Hosted by Anderson Cooper.

[91]Hilleary, Cecily. "Indigenous North Americans Speak Out on Papal Apology." Voice of America. Last modified July 28, 2022. Accessed June 26, 2023. https://www.voanews.com/a/indigenous-north-americans-speak-out-on-papal-apology/6677898.html.

[92]The Truth And Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth*, 319

[93]Ibid., 319-337

[94]"Beyond 94." CBC News. Last modified June 8, 2018. Accessed July 30, 2023. https://www.cbc.ca/newsinteractives/beyond-94

However, the government and churches have been too slow to execute these attempts at reconciliation. Despite past and ongoing efforts, there is still a long road ahead to reconciliation. Only through the continued effort by the federal government, churches, the Indigenous peoples, and the general Canadian public can true reconciliation and forgiveness happen.

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