



Nicholas Flood Davin and the 1879 Davin Report

Information sheet

Introduction

In 1879, Nicholas Flood Davin was commissioned by Prime Minister John A. Macdonald to study industrial schools established for Native Americans in the United States and assess whether similar schools should be implemented in Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). In his report, referred to as the *Davin Report* (1879), he recommended that Canada adopt this model, and expand its system of church-run residential schools for First Nations and Métis children.

Though residential schools predated Davin's report, the document represents an "official" justification and vision of assimilatory schools that guided John A. Macdonald's government to expand the residential school system following Confederation (Milloy, 1999, p. xxxviii). In the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) and national calls for reconciliation, Davin's views offer valuable perspective into the attitudes and aspirations that informed the design and function of the residential school system.

Residential schools and the TRC

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada was created to document survivors' experiences of residential schools, educate the public about their history, and make recommendations for redress (TRC, 2015). Between 2009 and 2015, the TRC gathered information about residential schools by listening to more than 6,000 survivors and witnesses, and reviewing thousands of relevant documents. In the footsteps of other inquiries, the TRC presented its findings and 94 Calls to Action to address the harms of residential schools, and end ongoing discrimination against Aboriginal peoples.

Residential schools were founded and operated through a partnership between the Government of Canada and the Roman Catholic, Anglican, United, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches. In these agreements, the government assumed responsibility for core funding, setting the standards of care, and supervising the administration of schools, while churches staffed and managed daily operations (Milloy, 1999).

For over a hundred years, the Government of Canada and these churches worked together to forcibly assimilate Aboriginal children into settler Canadian society (TRC, 2015). Central to this policy of assimilation, the residential school system functioned as a concerted attack on Aboriginal cultures, languages, and ways of life (TRC, 2015). Inadequate funding, staffing, supervision, facilities, and nourishment further exposed children in attendance to preventable

illnesses such as tuberculosis, and high rates of physical and sexual abuse (TRC, 2015). Isolation from family, culture, and land as well as the abuse and neglect enabled by residential schools inflicted devastating intergenerational impacts on Aboriginal families and communities that continue to impact the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal families and communities today (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2014).

Why were residential schools established?

Residential schools were a central strategy in the Canadian government's project of striving to assimilate Aboriginal peoples into settler Canadian society (Milloy, 1999). This goal was clearly expressed by John A. Macdonald, Canada's first Prime Minister, when he informed the House of Commons that the government's goal was "to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the inhabitants of the Dominion, as speedily as they are fit to change" (As cited in Milloy, 1999, p. 6). The TRC (2015) explains that this policy of assimilation was motivated by efforts on the part of the Canadian government "to divest itself of its legal and financial obligations to Aboriginal people and gain control over their land and resources" (p. 6).

In the British North America Act (1867), the blueprint for Confederation, the Canadian government gave itself "the power to legislate for Indians and their property" (Milloy, 1999, p. 20). Under the leadership of Prime Minister Macdonald following Confederation, Parliament outlawed traditional governance and spiritual practices, confined First Nations to reserves, imposed band councils with little power, and assumed the authority to control all aspects of reserve life including band council elections, membership, resources, and landholding (Milloy, 1999). These were some of the measures introduced attempting to rob Aboriginal peoples of their self-determination and displace them from their traditional territories accompanied the expansion of the residential school system (TRC, 2015).

Nicholas Flood Davin

Nicholas Flood Davin was a well-known lawyer, journalist, and Conservative politician who served as a Member of Parliament for Assiniboia West from 1887-1900 (Koester, 1980).

Born in Kilfinane, Ireland in 1843, and educated privately by the grace of a distant relative, Davin trained to be a lawyer and worked in both law and journalism in the United Kingdom (Koester, 1980).

He also spent time as a war correspondent in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 before moving to Toronto in 1872 (Koester, 1980).

Davin continued to work as a lawyer, journalist, and public lecturer in Toronto, where he wrote for *The Globe* (Gibson, 2008). After leaving *the Globe* to freelance in 1875, he published and performed lectures, novels, poems, and plays, of which the *Irishman in Canada* was most successful (Thompson, 1994).

In 1878, Davin ran for Parliament in Haldimand, a historically Liberal riding and was narrowly defeated (Thompson, 1994). His near success and request for a patronage position resulted in the new Conservative government commissioning Davin to conduct a study on American industrial schools and their suitability for the new country of Canada (Milloy, 1999, p.7).

After writing this report Davin travelled to Regina in 1883 where he started the *Regina Leader*, the city's first newspaper. Davin's reporting on the trial of Louis Riel in 1885 contributed significantly to his reputation as a journalist. In 1887, Davin became the Member of Parliament for Assiniboia West, a title he held until 1900. Davin greatly desired a seat in Cabinet, but his efforts were not met with success. While 1884 amendments to the Indian Act made it a felony for Aboriginal people to purchase alcohol, consume alcohol, or enter a licensed establishment, it bears mentioning that Davin struggled with alcoholism throughout his career (Joseph, 2018, p. 42; Thompson, 1996). He ended his own life during a visit to Winnipeg in 1901 (Gibson, 2008).

The 1879 Davin Report

As a part of his study on industrial schools, Davin travelled to the United States to visit boarding schools firsthand. He met with American officials who assured him of the efficiency of industrial schools as "the principal feature of the policy known as that of 'aggressive civilization'" (Milloy, 1999, p. 8).

The result of his study, a "Report on industrial schools for Indians and Half-breeds" (1879) offers valuable insight into the Government's rationale for and design of residential schools. The report articulated the utility of a residential schools in pacifying First Nations and Métis resistance asserted during the recent Red River Resistance of 1869-1870 (Milloy, 1999). Davin proposed that this problem of unrest, as he saw it, could be solved "only by educating Indians and mixed-bloods in self-reliance and industry" after which they would "welcome and facilitate...the settlement of the country" (Davin, 1879, p. 9, p. 10). Davin's argument that residential school education would suppress Aboriginal resistance to settlement re-emerged in more explicit terms a few years later after the North-West Resistance in 1885 when the Presbyterian church urged that, "the Indians would regard [their children] as hostages given to the whites and would hesitate to commit any hostile acts that might endanger their children's wellbeing" (As cited in Milloy, 1999, p. 32). These sources demonstrate that residential schools were used as a means of controlling and colonizing Aboriginal peoples (Milloy, 1999).

The degrading portrayal of Aboriginal peoples in Davin's report further highlights the racist colonial ideology that informed the expansion of the residential school system. Davin echoes the views

he encountered on his trip to the United States that even Aboriginal peoples who engaged in European-style farming and private land ownership "never could...cope with the white man in either cunning or industry" (Davin, 1879, p. 6). Aboriginal peoples are described in his report as "wholly barbarous", "deficient", and possessing "an inherited aversion to toil" (Davin, 1879, p. 7, p. 2). What Aboriginal peoples needed according to Davin (1879), "is to be taught to work, and to apprehend values" (p. 6).

Davin's report also showcases a preoccupation with the cost of industrial schools. He advised that "the aim...would be to make these schools self-supporting" and that they be managed "on economical and profitable principles" (Davin, 1879, p. 3). These directions influenced the "limited and confused" educational goals of residential schools, which the TRC (2015) states, "usually reflected a low regard for the intellectual capabilities of Aboriginal people" and "often gave way to the drudgery of...chores necessary to make the schools self-sustaining" (p. 7).

The removal of children

The claim that Aboriginal children should be separated from their families to attend residential schools is central to Davin's report. From his consultations in the United States, Davin reports that the industrial day schools for Aboriginal children "did not work, because the influence of the wigwam was stronger than the influence of the school" (Davin, 1879, p. 1). He concluded that in order to successfully assimilate Aboriginal peoples into settler Canadian society, children needed to be separated from their parents for as much of the year as possible (Milloy, 1999). Reflecting an assumption of European superiority, Davin writes, "if anything is to be done with the Indian, we must catch him very young. The children must be kept constantly within the circle of civilized conditions" (Davin, 1879, p. 12).

The physical separation of Aboriginal children from their families and communities was intended to prevent the passing of Aboriginal culture and ways of life from one generation to the next (Milloy, 1999). This argument would become a key part of the rationale behind the expansion of the residential school system in Canada.

Davin's recommendations

At the end of his 1879 report, Nicholas Flood Davin makes several recommendations to the newly formed Government of Canada. Leaders in the Catholic Church were also involved in steering the direction and implementation of Davin's recommendations (Milloy, 1999, p. 54).

Following the American model, Davin strongly recommended that the Canadian government contract churches to establish and manage residential schools. Christian clergy, in Davin's opinion, were best suited to undermine Aboriginal knowledge and beliefs and convert Aboriginal children to Christianity. In his recommendations, he writes, "the importance of denominational schools at the outset for the Indians must be obvious. One of the earliest things an attempt to civilize them does, is to take away their simple Indian mythology" (Davin, 1879, p. 14).

The report also suggests that education in industrial schools be made compulsory “as bands become amenable to the restraints of civilization” (Davin, 1879, p. 15). Davin (1879) further advises that in the interim, compliant families be incentivized with “an additional ration of tea and sugar,” and that “advantages” be offered to students showing “special aptitudes” (p. 15). Davin (1879) insists that teachers must possess a strong moral character, that they be paid a proper salary, and that teachers who “manage their schools in a manner tending towards self-support, should have a percentage on the reduction in the cost of management” (p. 15-16). It also calls for “competent inspection” of the schools in order to ensure “that the education given would be efficient” (Davin, 1879, p. 15-16).

The report proposes the establishment of four new industrial schools on the Prairies, and gave specific directions as to where they should be located (Davin, 1879). The Canadian Government quickly embraced these recommendations, opening the High River, Battleford, and Qu’Appelle industrial schools in the 1880s (Milloy, 1999, p. 51).

Over the next several decades, the residential school system continued to expand, despite conditions of overcrowding, deterioration and disease that stemmed from chronic underfunding of the system. In 1897, Kah-pah-pah-man-am-wa-ko-we-ko-chin, spoke out about the death rate at the Qu’Appelle industrial school, stating, “Our children are not strong. Many of them are sick most of the time, many of the children sent from this Reserve to the Schools have died” (as cited in TRC, 2015, p. 68). As a result, Kah-pah-pah-man-am-wa-ko-we-ko-chin was deposed from his position of leadership in the White Bear Reserve (TRC, 2015).

In total, there were over 139 residential schools located across Canada, with the last federally supported school closing in 1996 (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015, p. 3).

Conclusion

The Final Report of the TRC (2015) attests to the tremendous harm inflicted by residential schools and the intergenerational impacts they have had on Aboriginal families and communities. The residential school system is now characterized as cultural genocide, which the TRC (2015) defines as “the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group” (p. 1).

While boarding schools were already in existence prior to the Davin Report, the document can be credited with guiding the Canadian government’s expansion of the residential school system. The report reveals government anxieties over Aboriginal resistance to colonization, and the utility of residential schools in pacifying Aboriginal communities and easing European settlement. Davin’s (1879) promotion of the “aggressive civilization” of Aboriginal peoples, and his key recommendation that children be separated from their families as a means of severing their connections to culture and land illustrates the racist colonial ideology that informed the residential school system (p. 1). Finally, the document also demonstrates an early preoccupation with cost over care in the operation of residential schools, a concern that forecasts the chronic underfunding and institutionalized neglect that characterized the system (TRC, 2015).

The legacy of residential schools, the TRC (2015) writes, endures, “in the significant disparities in education, income, and health between Aboriginal people and other Canadians” (p. 103). The system’s legacy lives on through the Canadian government’s systemic underfunding of essential services such as education, child welfare, healthcare, housing, infrastructure, etc. for Aboriginal peoples. This ongoing colonial policy perpetuates the separation of Aboriginal children from their families, cultures, and lands by, for example, contributing to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care. Understanding the history of residential schools and their official function helps us to identify how these processes are still at work today and to work with Aboriginal communities, families, and children in their fight for self-determination and justice.

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