

The Goals of Indian Residential Schools

Why were Indian Residential Schools created? The government, the churches and the Canadian public had a number of goals for the schools. Here are some comments made at the time the schools were created. Others are excerpts from *They Came for the Children*. You can look up the excerpts in the book to find more detail.

Read these comments to uncover some of the main goals. Which do you think were the most important goals for the Canadian government, for the churches, and for the Canadian people?

1. In 1887, Lawrence Vankoughnet, the deputy minister of Indian Affairs, justified the investment in residential schools by claiming that Aboriginal children who went to day schools “followed the terrible example set them by their parents.”
(*They Came for the Children*, p. 10)

2. When the system was expanded in northern Canada in 1954, the federal government’s Sub-Committee on Eskimo Education concluded: “The residential school is perhaps the most effective way of giving children from primitive environments, experience in education along the lines of civilization leading to vocational training to fit them for occupations in the white man’s economy.”
(*They Came for the Children*, p. 12)

3. 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 mythology, the central idea of which, to wit, a perfect spirit, can hardly be improved on. ... To disturb the faith, without supplying a better [one], would be a curious process. (Davin Report 1879 p. 14)

The type of education Davin was advocating would undermine existing spiritual and cultural beliefs, and it would be wrong, he said, to destroy their faith “without supplying a better” one; namely, Christianity. (*They Came for the Children* p. 10)

4. We are glad to see that the education to be extended to the Indians is to be of the right sort. It is to be a practical education. The position which the pupil is to occupy after he leaves school is to be kept continually in sight. He is to be taught to work with his hands so that when he is sent into the world he will be able to earn his bread by engaging in some useful and steady occupation. We see, too, that while he is serving his apprenticeship to civilization the Indian educationalists think that the pupil should be separated as much as possible from old and degrading associations. They prefer boarding schools to day schools. They want to have the child all to themselves for a few years.
(Editorial in the *British Colonist*, February 22, 1889)

5. [In the United States] the industrial school is the principal feature of the policy known as that of “aggressive civilization.” ... The experience of the United States is the same as our own... The child who goes to a day school learns little, and what little he learns is soon forgotten, while his tastes are fashioned at home, and his inherited aversion to toil is in no way combated. (Davin report, 1879, page 1-2.)

6. One year after the 1885 Northwest Rebellion, Indian Affairs school inspector J.A. Macrae noted, “It is unlikely that any Tribe or tribes would give trouble of a serious nature to the Government whose members had children completely under Government control.”
(*They Came for the Children*, p. 13)

7. Duncan Campbell Scott worried in 1910 that “without education and with neglect the Indians would produce an undesirable and often dangerous element in society.” (They Came for the Children, p. 13)

8. Nineteenth century missionaries believed their efforts to convert Aboriginal people to Christianity were part of a worldwide struggle for the salvation of souls. This belief provided justification for undermining traditional spiritual leaders (who were treated as agents of the devil), banning sacred cultural practices, and attempting to impose a new moral code on Aboriginal people by requiring them to abandon their traditional family structures. (They Came for the Children, p. 15)

9. Kamloops Industrial School

This excellent institution, established by a paternal Government to elevate the Indian races, is situated on a lovely spot on the South Thompson River, the buildings themselves being of modern design and admirably suited for the education, both social and intellectual, of the aborigines who are wards of the nation. ...

We look far into the future and see the little girls – now clustering about the Christian ladies who are teaching them the lessons of life – becoming wives and mothers, and inculcating those truths which are the blessed inheritance of the white man, uplifting and broadening their character and aims; while one need not be a prophet to predict that the day is not far distant when some of the boys who are now climbing the rough road to learning will emulate their fellows in the Northwest who have made names for themselves in the history of their native land.

(Editorial in Vancouver Daily World, July 22, 1890, p. 2.)

10. As the years have gone by the purpose of Indian education has become clearer, and the best means to be employed to reach the desired end are becoming apparent. It is now recognized that the provision of education for the Indian means an attempt to develop the great natural intelligence of the race and to fit the Indian for civilized life in his own environment. It includes not only a school education, but also instruction in the means of gaining a livelihood from the soil or as a member of an industrial or mercantile community, and the substitution of Christian ideals of conduct and morals for aboriginal conceptions of both.

To this end the curriculum in residential schools has been simplified, and the practical instruction given is such as may be immediately of use to the pupil when he returns to the reserve after leaving school.

(Duncan Campbell Scott, in Canada and Its Provinces, Doughty and Shortt, 1914, p. 616)

11. To both Protestant and Catholic missionaries, Aboriginal spiritual beliefs were little more than superstition and witchcraft. In British Columbia, William Duncan of the Church Missionary Society reported: “I cannot describe the conditions of this people better than by saying that it is just what might be expected in savage heathen life.” Missionaries led the campaign to outlaw Aboriginal sacred ceremonies such as the Potlatch on the west coast and the Sun Dance on the Prairies. (They Came for the Children, p. 15)

12. While church and government officials would have their differences, their overall commitment to civilizing and Christianizing Aboriginal children gave rise to an education system that emphasized the need to separate children from their culture, impose a new set of values and beliefs, provide a basic elementary education, and implant Europe’s emerging industrial work discipline. (They Came for the Children, p. 16)