

## **The Presbyterian Church in Canada and Native Residential Schools, 1925-1969**

PETER BUSH

---

In 1990 the subject of the church-run Residential Schools for Native Canadians reached the front pages of our national newspapers. In Manitoba, students of the Residential School system were heard clearly for the first time as individuals like Phil Fontaine, Chief of the Manitoba Assembly of Chiefs, spoke forcefully on the issue. Even the CBC played a role by broadcasting the movie, "Where the Spirit Lives." This discussion in the public media led the churches to examine their role in the running of these schools. The Roman Catholic Church in Manitoba has committed itself to providing financial support to those hurt by the Residential system, while other denominations are still struggling with how to respond to this emotional issue.

At last year's General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, there was an extremely emotional debate about how the Presbyterian Church should respond to the fact that the Women's Missionary Society (Western Division) (WMS-WD) operated two Native Residential Schools from 1925 to 1969. These schools were the Birtle Residential School in Birtle, Manitoba and Cecilia Jeffrey Residential School located near Kenora, Ontario. The proposed report and confession were defeated by the Assembly, primarily because the proposed document failed to recognize the context in which the schools were run, and substantially downplayed any good that might have come from the schools. As I witnessed this debate, I was struck by the fact that the debate was taking place in an historical vacuum. Very few of the commissioners at the Assembly

*Historical Papers 1993: Canadian Society of Church History*

knew where the two schools in question were located, let alone who was responsible for the schools, what was taught in the classrooms, or what life was like for both students and staff. This paper hopes to fill some of that vacuum.

There are in fact two historical contexts in which the schools existed. One is the Native context, for the perspective of the student must be heard. But that is a context with which I am not qualified to deal, for I believe that such a story should be told by Aboriginal people and not by a white researcher. The other context, is the perspective of the “top-down.” This is the story as seen in the Annual Reports of the Schools, the correspondence between the school staffs and the WMS-WD, and the dialogues between the WMS-WD and the government. It is this story that will be examined in this paper.

The Presbyterian Church has always seen education as part of its mission. This view led to the development of schools being part of the missionary activity of the church, be that endeavour in China, Taiwan, Guyana or among the Native peoples of Canada. Often this educational activity was carried out by women—missionaries sent out by the WMS-WD. Teaching people to read and write was a spiritual activity for it allowed the students to read the Bible and to take their proper place in the civilized, literate world. These early educational missionaries had a spiritual vision of their calling. This vision can be clearly seen in the life of Lucy Baker, the first female Presbyterian missionary to work among the Native people of Canada.<sup>1</sup>

The move from small one-room day-schools on reserves, like those started by Lucy Baker, to the establishment of large Residential Schools was motivated by a desire for efficiency. The churches realized that they could not hope to build and staff schools within easy walking or horse-back riding distance of each Native band. Therefore, small dormitories were added to many of the schools to house those students who were unable to return home daily. The federal government was very supportive of the churches' educational activity and offered some financial assistance. It began with the government building large residences, often housing over two hundred students, which were attached to centrally located church-run schools. This dramatically changed the face of schooling for Native children—so much so that by 1900 the Residential school system was seen as the most efficient way of educating Native children. It was only after the Residential schools had been established that the so-called benefits of

removing children from their parents, reserves and culture were seen.

At the turn of the century educational ministry was the cornerstone of the Presbyterian Church in Canada's missionary activity among the Native peoples. By 1920, the denomination was running seven residential schools and five day-schools on reserves. The residential schools were located in Kenora, ON; Portage-la-Prairie and Birtle, MB; Round Lake and File Hills, SK; and Alberni and Ahoushat, BC.<sup>2</sup> With the completion of Church Union in 1925, the United Church of Canada was awarded five of the residential schools and all of the day-schools, while the Presbyterians were left with Cecilia Jeffrey and the Birtle School.

This division of property was an arbitrary decision made by a federal government commission without consultation with the Native people connected to the schools affected. The Sioux Indians living on the Portage Reserve petitioned the Commission to leave the Portage School in the hands of the Presbyterians. Their request was ignored.<sup>3</sup>

The federal government's involvement with the schools had started by paying for only capital projects, like the new buildings, beds, mattresses – while the WMS-WD paid all salaries as well as covering food and clothing costs for the Presbyterian-run schools. Beginning in the 1920s the government provided an annual per capita grant, which grew over time to cover more and more of the day-to-day operation of the schools. By the 1950s, the government grant covered all the costs of running the schools. In 1947, this annual grant was set at \$210 per student in residence. By 1952, it had risen to \$338 per student. While this appears to be a handsome increase it was clear that the Residential School administrations were hard-pressed to provide for the students' needs out of this grant. For example, of the 1952 per capita grant, once the staff salaries had been paid there was only \$21 a month per student to cover food, clothing, recreational pursuits, transportation, and building maintenance.<sup>4</sup> The school staff had difficulty making the money stretch as far as the government thought it should. Even the most successful principal-manager, N.M. Rusaw, complained to the WMS-WD:

I can't see how we can cut the food bills down with the number of children we have at present. The Indians have been complaining to the agent and have written to Ottawa that their children have not been getting sufficient. Personally, I agree that the children have not had any too much.<sup>5</sup>

Those responsible for the day-to-day operation of the schools, did not find the government grant overly generous. In fact, they were convinced that students were being short-changed, but their appeals for more funding from the government fell on largely deaf ears.

However, as the government through the Indian Affairs Branch of the Department of Mines and Natural Resources paid a larger and larger share of the school costs, they demanded an increasing amount of control over the operation of the schools. In 1940 E.W. Byers was removed as principal of Cecilia Jeffrey School, Kenora, not because of the allegations of widespread sexual activity among the student body or because Byers had little disciplinary control of the school or the staff, but because

the principals of the Indian Schools are appointed subject to the approval of the Department [of Mines and Natural Resources], and as for two years the Government has not been satisfied with conditions in the School, there was no other course open to us but to ask for your resignation.<sup>6</sup>

The two things that the Inspector, sent from Winnipeg, as upset about were: how Byers was spending government money, and that, “As pointed out previously, Mr. Byers gives the impression that he has no responsibility except to the church officials.”<sup>7</sup> The Indian Affairs Branch wanted it very clear who called the shots – the principals of the Residential Schools, and, in fact, the entire staff, were responsible to the government for their actions especially in relation to financial matters. As the Memorandum of Agreement between the federal government and the WMS-WD shows, the government very clearly saw itself as jointly responsible with the various Christian denominations, which were running schools, for the well-being of the students in the schools.<sup>8</sup>

While the Society sought to employ as principals of the Residential people who had background in education and were ordained ministers of the Presbyterian Church, the principals were hired primarily as managers. More than eighty-five percent of correspondence in the Presbyterian Church Archives relating to the Native Residential Schools deals with managerial and accounting issues. The principals were responsible for coordinating a staff of fifteen to twenty people, something with which few of the principals had any experience. The staff included the matron (who was

usually the principal's wife), three classroom teachers, an art or craft teacher, farm instructor, physical education instructor, cook, one or two kitchen helpers, washing person, sewing room matron, maintenance person, supervisor for the boy's dormitory, supervisor for the girl's dormitory and night watchperson. The actual configuration of the staff changed from school to school – but the above list is fairly representative of the staff positions in the school. Lockhart, who was principal of Birtle school from 1933 to 1940, stated “90% of the problem in our schools is our staff.”<sup>9</sup> Managing a staff was a more difficult process than Lockhart had anticipated.

The principals also played a role in managing the finances of the schools. The principal would purchase the supplies needed to run the school, submitting monthly bills to the Society in Toronto to pay, but they never knew exactly how much the Society had received in per capita grants. T.C. Ross, one of the more innovative principals at Cecilia Jeffrey, had a three-year running battle with the WMS-WD asking for more information about how much money the Society was receiving to run the school, so that he could determine what to buy when salespersons came selling their products.<sup>10</sup> Lockhart, principal at Birtle school from 1933 to 1942, finally resigned as principal because he and the Society could not agree on how to do the accounting.<sup>11</sup> The WMS-WD Executive, located in Toronto, used the purse strings to maintain control over the schools and the actions of the principals.

It was easy for the WMS-WD and the principals to lose sight of the fact that these were schools and that education was a spiritual endeavour. Educationally the schools had two foci – on the one hand, their purpose was to teach young Native people to read and write and to develop an appreciation for learning. At the same time, the schools had a mandate to give the students the living skills that the dominant, white society believed they needed to live fulfilled lives. This split vision led to a confused leadership of the schools.

Since the Residential Schools were boarding schools which the children attended for ten months of the year (children were not allowed to go home for Christmas until the early 1950s), most Native parents did not send their children to school until they were eight or nine years old. The children at Residential Schools were only in class half-days, spending the other half of the day working on the farms attached to schools or helping prepare meals, washing clothes, and doing other household chores. Thus,

by the time most Native children left the Residential School system at the age of sixteen or seventeen they had completed no more than a Grade five or six education. R. Webb, principal of Birtle School from 1942 to 1945, challenged the prevailing view when he noted,

The Indian parents see the white children going to school all day. Then, their children tell them how they spend their half-day out of school. This half-day is spent working in the laundry; or, in mending clothes . . . *They are not learning anything* [sic] after the first short while . . . The Indians want their children to have every educational opportunity. The plain facts of the situation are that they are not.<sup>12</sup>

Against the wishes of the government, Webb introduced to the Birtle school full days in the classroom for students in Grade four and over. While this initiative was supported by the local Indian Agent, the Indian Affairs branch believed that the most valuable things that Native children could take back to the reserves would be a knowledge of basic hygiene and simple farming techniques. It was feared that full days in the classroom would limit the chance of children learning these skills. The government's approach condemned Native people to never succeeding academically, or reaching beyond a secondary school education. Under the leadership of R. Webb and N. M. Rusaw, Webb's successor, Birtle School saw a number of its graduates go on to trade schools and universities. Among those who went on for further education were Gordon Williams, the first Native person to be ordained a minister of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and Colin Wasacase, who became the administrator of the Cecilia Jeffrey Native Residence in 1967.

The schools existed in the middle of a dominant society that was uncertain about its beliefs concerning Native people. On the one hand, there were those who believed that the Native people were capable individuals who should be treated as such; and on the other hand, there were those whose limited view saw Native peoples as "wards of the government." This same tension was reflected among the staff of the two schools.

Barbara Dean became the teacher of the senior class at the Birtle school in September 1946, and quickly realized that if she was going to teach effectively she would have "to have respect for Indian culture."<sup>13</sup> Towards this purpose she tried to obtain dictionaries in Sioux, Cree and Saulteux (the three languages spoken by the Native children at Birtle

School) as well as a book of Indian songs and ceremonial dances. There were no such books at the school, an indication of the low importance placed on Native culture in the Residential School environment. But the WMS-WD did not have any such resources and the Indian Affairs Branch of the federal government was able to provide only a Sioux-English dictionary. At this time it was still illegal for a Native person in full Native dress to perform a traditional dance, without the written permission of the Indian Affairs branch. The penalty for such a performance was a \$50.00 fine or a month in jail or both.<sup>14</sup>

This openness to Native culture was reflected in the work of J. Eldon Andrews, principal of Cecilia Jeffrey 1952-1953, who resurrected a student government system that had been introduced by E. W. Byers in the 1930s. The student government was built on the Native model of an elected Chief and Band councillors – thus within the confines of the school, the council and chief had self-government.<sup>15</sup> Andrews argued that anyone working with the Native people of Canada had to have a solid understanding of sociology and anthropology, further he maintained that teachers and administrators at Cecilia Jeffrey School should learn Ojibwa as a pre-requisite to teaching Native children English.<sup>16</sup>

As a counter-point to this desire to understand Native culture, there were those connected to the schools who showed no such openness. This immediately makes people think about the stories of abuse that have become all too common as Native people have talked about their experiences in the Residential Schools. The abuse took two forms: first, physical and sexual abuse; and secondly, cultural abuse by a dominant culture over a subordinate culture.

Given the “top-down” approach this paper has taken, it is hard to determine how much physical and sexual abuse took place in the Presbyterian run schools – it was not the kind of thing that made the official reports in the period under study. However, in 1939 the Indian Affairs Branch and the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) visited Cecilia Jeffrey School, following up rumours of sexual immorality among students and between students and staff, and to pursue charges regarding the misappropriation of government funds. The OPP took statements from fifteen young people in their mid-teens who had engaged in heterosexual intercourse in the dormitories and on the grounds of the school. The students’ statements made reference to their witnessing some of the unmarried staff engaging in sexual activity. One male student, age seventeen, stated that he had been

seduced by the supervisor of the girls' dormitory. None of these statements were ever followed up by the police or by the WMS-WD. The only result of the investigation was that it provided further grounds for the removal of Byers as Principal of the school.<sup>17</sup>

Byers' replacement, Pitts, was a strict disciplinarian who believed in the use of the strap. The following was reported to the WMS-WD by a Miss Ross, a teacher at Cecilia Jeffrey:

. . . one time when the children were being strapped . . . from the noise it seemed as if the girls were being knocked against the wall. A rubber strap is used which must reach the children's arms because they swell. The door opened and it seemed as though someone tumbled out. Mr. Pitts called out "You dirty, filthy" but Miss Ross did not catch the last word. "Spit it out in the hall, you dirty, lying rats," he concluded. On another occasion Mr. Pitts had called the children in Miss Ross' classroom "You dirty, lying sneaks."<sup>18</sup>

Ross also noted that Pitts had beaten a boy so badly that he had to be cared for by the nurse. The WMS-WD took Ross' complaints under advisement, but the minutes of meeting held with her by the WMS-WD executive, show little concern over Pitts' disciplinary style. Ross left the school in April 1944, saying she could no longer work in that kind of environment.

It seems clear from the two situations recounted above that Cecilia Jeffrey was struggling under poor leadership through the period from 1937 to 1945. The leaders created an atmosphere in which physical abuse was able to exist unchecked. But these are the only examples of this type of abuse that my research has discovered.

The cultural abuse was more subtle, but none-the-less real. Much of this abuse had to do with the dominant, white culture using its power to denigrate the subordinate, Native culture. The reserves were seen as cesspools of poor health, ignorance and maybe even sin. Students coming from the reserves had to be made ready to go to school, and the Indian Secretary of the WMS-WD in 1933 was genuinely surprised to find out how much time it took to "get the children cleaned up."<sup>19</sup> Even Andrews, who was so open to Native culture, refused to let children return to the reserves for Christmas holidays in 1953 unless their parents or guardians could guarantee that there would be proper sanitation, lighting, ventilation and nutrition provided to the students over the holidays.<sup>20</sup> The general perception of the reserves was well expressed by R. Webb, who wrote to



the WMS-WD saying, "The Reserve life is not what it should be for young graduates; but the tendency is to drift back there."<sup>21</sup> Underlying these concerns about the reserves was a paternalistic belief that the Native people were unable to care for themselves as well as might be hoped.

There were more blatantly racist views that were also expressed. In the school year 1939-1940, Mary Begg, the first Native person to hold a teaching position at Birtle school, was hired to teach craft skills. But she left in March, before the end of the school year, saying that she had been mistreated by the staff and the principal. The one white teacher who had been able to befriend Mary Begg wrote that, "I think it breaks [Mary's] heart to be in such a disgusting affair. I do not think she wants to go, but would rather die than be misunderstood."<sup>22</sup> It is not entirely clear how Begg felt mistreated, but racist attitudes among some of the staff played a role in her departure. The racist attitudes expressed by one of the Presbyterian Church's missionaries to the Native peoples, summed up the views of many connected with ministry to Native people: "Of course, I suppose you know the difference between the Indian and the White man. The White takes what is given to him and is thankful for that. The Indian takes what he gets, and asks for some more."<sup>23</sup> This attitude towards the Native peoples, would have made it difficult for Residential school staff to take seriously the complaints raised by students and their parents.<sup>24</sup>

T.C. Ross, principal at Cecilia Jeffrey, put his finger on the problem that the Residential schools faced when he wrote,

Here is an institution in which the government professes to be attempting to educate, and the church professes to be attempting to evangelize. The government grant is too small for an adequate staff of teachers. As a result education suffers. None but a few of the present staff attach due importance to the task of presenting the Gospel of Jesus Christ to these children.<sup>25</sup>

The government was unwilling to provide the schools with the financial resources necessary to do their job well. The WMS-WD was unable or unwilling to support the schools financially, choosing instead to manage the schools on behalf of the government. In the process of managing the schools, the WMS-WD and the staffs of the schools lost the spiritual center that had created the schools in the first place. N.M. Rusaw, who the WMS-WD heralded as one of the most successful principals, was criticized by

staff, students and parents for not encouraging the spiritual life of the school.<sup>26</sup> As the leaders in schools lost their spiritual focus, it became easier for racist, abusive, and de-humanizing forms of leadership to enter the school. As the WMS-WD became simply the managers of people, money, and the schools – they lost the spiritual core that had brought them into educational ministry in the first place. The loss of the spiritual vision, meant that the schools became the perpetuators of the dominant society, oppressing and destroying Native life and culture through a belief in the “-rightness” of the “Canadian social religion.”

### ***Endnotes***

1. Elizabeth A. Byers, *Lucy Margerat Baker: A Biographical Sketch* (Toronto: WMS-WD, 1920), passim. This item can be found in The Records of the WMS-WD, Box 60, file 2, Presbyterian Church Archives (PCA).
2. WMS-WD Reports, *The Planting of the Faith* (Toronto: WMS-WD, 1921), 263.
3. Petition from Sioux Village of Portage-la-Prairie, 17 February 1927, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 2, file 5, PCA.
4. Statement “Re: Principal’s Duties,” 9 May 1952, Correspondence, Indian Secretary, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 15, file 8, PCA.
5. N.M. Rusaw (Principal, Birtle School) to Secretary of Indian Department (WMS-WD), 19 November 1945, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 7, file 5, PCA.
6. Lang (Indian Secretary, WMS-WD) to E.W. Byers (Principal, Cecilia Jeffrey), 5 February 1940, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 8, File 1, PCA.
7. Report of Inspector Hamilton, Indian Affairs, Winnipeg to Department of Mines and Natural Resources, Ottawa, July 1939, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 8, file 2, PCA.
8. Memorandum of Agreement between Her Majesty the Queen in the Right of Canada and WMS-WD, 22 May 1962, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 13, file 5, PCA.
9. Lockhart (Principal, Birtle School) to Lang (Indian Secretary, WMS-WD), 24 August 1940, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 7, file 2, PCA.

10. T.C. Ross (Principal, Cecilia Jeffrey) to F. Matthews (Indian Secretary, WMS-WD), 19 August 1949, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 14, file 8, PCA.
11. Lang (Indian Secretary, WMS-WD) to Lockhart (Principal, Birtle School), 11 February 1942, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 7, file 3, PCA.
12. R. Webb (Principal, Birtle School) to Lang (Indian Secretary, WMS-WD), 30 November 1944, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 7, file 4, PCA.
13. Barbara Dean (Teacher, Birtle School) to M.C. Cruikshank (Indian Secretary, WMS-WD), 19 October 1946, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 8, file 4, PCA.
14. Correspondence to Indian Secretary, WMS-WD, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 12, file 3, PCA.
15. J. Eldon Andrews, "Toward a Better Understanding of the Canadian Indian," *The Glad Tidings* (publication of the WMS-WD) (June 1954): 256-260.
16. Report of Cecilia Jeffrey School, 6 April 1953, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 15 file 4, PCA.
17. Ontario Provincial Police Report, 27 July 1939, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 8, file 2, PCA.
18. Minutes of Special Meeting, WMS-WD Executive Committee, 27 April 1944, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 8, file 3, PCA.
19. Secretary Indian Department, WMS-WD to Mrs. Currie (Matron, Birtle School), 14 September 1933, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 7, file 1, PCA.
20. J.E. Andrews to Parents of Students, December 1953, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 15 file 4, PCA.
21. Webb (Principal, Birtle School) to Lang (Indian Secretary, WMS-WD), 5 March 1945, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 7, file 5, PCA.
22. Kathleen Stewart (teacher, Birtle School) to Lang (Indian Secretary, WMS-WD), 26 March 1940, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 7, file 2, PCA.
23. J.Y. Garrett (missionary at Waywayseecappo) to Dr. Cameron (General Secretary, Board of Mission, Presbyterian Church of Canada), n.d., The Records of the WMS-WD, Box 7, file 6, PCA.
24. J.C.E. Andrews, Annual Report of Cecilia Jeffrey School, 1953, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 15, file 4, PCA.
25. T.C. Ross (Principal, Cecilia Jeffrey) to F. Matthews (Indian Secretary, WMS-WD), 5 January 1949, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 14, file 8, PCA.

26. G. Kelly (Director, National Missions, WMS-WD) to Elsie Pitman, 7 July 1966, Records of the WMS-WD, Box 13, file 6, PCA.