

Rielly K. Orrell

*“Those Children Did Not Reach Home”:
The British Empire’s Legacy in Canada’s Residential Schools
from 1830 until Today*

ABSTRACT: *This article examines how being a part of the British Empire influenced the construction and mission of Canada’s residential schools. On the basis of survivors’ first-hand accounts and government documents, it highlights the psychological impact these institutions had on their students, specifically those of the Secwépemc First Nations, and it assesses the modern perception of residential schools in the media. The author argues that the Canadian government took inspiration from the British Empire’s ethos when operating these institutions and has failed to fully recognize its hand in tearing apart Indigenous communities and families.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; British Empire; Canada; Indigenous; First Nations; Secwépemc; residential schools; Kamloops Indian Residential School (KIRS); children; Truth and Reconciliation Commission*

Introduction

In May 2021, anthropologist Sarah Beaulieu used ground-penetrating radar to identify the unmarked graves of over 215 children outside Kamloops Indian Residential School (KIRS) after scanning just two acres of the institution’s sprawling grounds in British Columbia.¹ This discovery prompted grief and outrage among Canada’s First Nations, culminating in a protest group tearing down and decapitating a statue of Queen Victoria on the Manitoba Legislative Grounds on Canada Day of the same year.² Heated debates have ensued on all sides of the political spectrum regarding what should be done with Canada’s inherited legacy of colonialism, and whether the treatment of First Nations children at residential schools should be considered a true cultural genocide. This article explores the history of Canadian residential schools through the concept of cultural genocide, tracing the echoes of the British Empire up to the present day through the removal of Indigenous children’s cultural ties, traditional values, language, and even their very names. Since the First Nations throughout Canada were at times vastly different from one another, it is challenging and unhelpful to create a monolith out of the diverse peoples who were sent to residential schools. Thus, this article focuses on KIRS and those who attended it, namely, the children of the Secwépemc First Nation.

¹ Jana G. Pruden and Mike Hager, “Anthropologist Explains How She Concluded 200 Children Were Buried at the Kamloops Residential School,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 16, 2021, [online](#). The title of this article is a quote from KIRS Le Estcwéy (The Missing) Findings Presentation and TteS Next Steps, Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc Special Assembly, in “B.C. First Nation Releases Report on Unmarked Graves Discovered in Kamloops,” cpac, streamed July 15, 2021, video, [online](#).

² Rachel Bergen, “Mother Figure or Colonial Oppressor? Examining Queen Victoria’s Legacy After Winnipeg Statue Toppled,” *CBC News*, July 7, 2021, [online](#).

To proceed, it is essential to define the term “cultural genocide.” According to Elisa Novic’s 2016 monograph, *The Concept of Cultural Genocide*, “[c]ultural genocide is the systematic destruction of traditions, values, language, and other elements that make one group of people distinct from another.”³ To apply the description to the daily schedules of children enrolled in a residential school, this article references first-hand accounts, including interviews of KIRS survivors.

To understand how there came to be over 130 federally sponsored residential schools throughout Canada housing up to 150,000 children, it is necessary to acknowledge why Britain and Canada deemed them necessary.⁴ British settlers were at first hesitant to make the journey to Canada. Ms. Marion Cran (1879–1942) wrote in her account: “The first time I went to Canada, I spent the days of preparation for departure in being very sorry for myself,” and “Canada was an ugly, cold, iceberg place.”⁵ In response to this dismal reputation, pamphlets and handbooks were published to encourage settlers to travel there. One such manual described Canada as “a second England” with “200,000 square miles of land...inhabited by the Red Indian alone.”⁶ The respective texts reveal the notion that only Britain was capable of “properly” utilizing land. Indeed, the concept of land ownership and who deserves to own land is a thread that can be traced in all of the British colonies during the height of the empire.

The British settlers arriving in Canada were aware of the tensions between First Nations groups and settlers in the United States, and Canadian officials were keen on avoiding similar conflicts. Thus, British journalist Frederick Chesson (1833–1888) wrote to the Principal Secretary of State for the Colonies: “The natives generally entertain ineradicable feelings of hostility toward the Americans, who are now pouring into Fraser and Thompson Rivers by thousands, and who will probably value Indian life there as cheaply as they have, unfortunately, done in California.”⁷ Chesson also noted that the contempt and suspicion between Canadian settlers and Indigenous groups caused notable anxiety for Canadian people, as they dreaded “a deadly war of races” like the one seen on the American

³ Elisa Novic, *The Concept of Cultural Genocide: An International Law Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), [online](#).

⁴ Rachel Treisman, “This New Canadian Holiday Reflects on the Legacy of Indigenous Residential Schools,” *NPR*, September 30, 2021, [online](#). This number of schools (i.e., 130) does not include day schools or those not federally run.

⁵ Marion Dudley Cran, *A Woman in Canada* (Toronto: The Musson Book Co., 1910), 9, Gale Nineteenth Century Collections Online.

⁶ *The Handbook of British Columbia, and Emigrant’s Guide to the Gold Fields* (London: W. Oliver, 1862), 3.

⁷ British Columbia Legislative Assembly, *British Columbia: Papers Connected with the Indian Land Question, 1850–1875* (Victoria: Richard Wolfenden, 1876), 13, [online](#).

frontier.⁸ This line of thinking led the Canadian Parliament to pursue the assimilation of First Nations groups into Euro-Canadian society.

The influx of British settlers negatively impacted the First Nations by encroaching on their territory and overhunting the game that these communities were relying upon. In 1830, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Sir George Murray, proposed a significant change to Indigenous relations within the British Empire. In an idea reminiscent of the later reservation system, Murray suggested creating communities for tribes to be relocated to, with their own schools, churches, and other municipal services, and to furnish these communities with “agriculture and all the arts and crafts of settler life” to make them entirely self-sufficient “based on a modern economy.”⁹ However, this reservation system did not address the ultimate goal purported by humanists and politicians alike, namely, to assimilate First Nations into Euro-Canadian society. The residential schools combined the ideas of assimilation and a reservation-based system by attempting to cut off future generations from their families and identities.

I. Killing the Indian in the Child

In¹⁰ its 1904 annual report, the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs published two photographs of the same child. Both depicted young Thomas Moore, a Muscowpetung Saulteaux First Nation boy, as an example of a “before and after” result of attending the Regina Indian Industrial School in Saskatchewan. The “before” photograph depicts Moore wearing Muscowpetung Saulteaux clothing and jewelry with moccasins, braided hair reaching past his hips, a gun in his right hand, and a bundle of furs to his left. This depiction aligned with the typical European idea of First Nations people as “violent,” as evidenced by the gun, and “nomadic,” as evidenced by the furs, which reminded the annual report’s white audience of the fur trade.¹¹ The “after” photograph depicts Moore confidently leaning on a stone wall, with one hand on his hip as if posing for a painted portrait, with short cropped hair, wearing a plain black suit, shoes, and a hat, and with a potted plant beside him. Moore appears “staged” to display the ideals of Victorian society, with historians noting the potted plant as “elevated above him,” signifying “that the plant is cultivated nature; no longer wild” (as Moore had been).¹²

These photographs are used as the face of Canadian residential schools on many websites and book covers referenced in this article, and for good reason:

⁸ British Columbia Legislative Assembly, *British Columbia: Papers Connected with the Indian Land Question, 1850–1875*, 12–13.

⁹ John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017; originally published 1999), 11.

¹⁰ For the title of this article’s first part, see Brittany Webster, “A Living Nightmare: Kamloops Indian Residential School,” *iHeartRadio*, October 1, 2021, [online](#).

¹¹ See John S. Milloy, “Suffer the Little Children”: *The Aboriginal Residential School System 1830–1992* ([Ottawa]: Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996), between pages 8 and 9, [online](#).

¹² Milloy, *Suffer the Little Children*, 10.

they tangibly and powerfully illustrate the main goals of these institutions. In 1908, Frank Oliver, the Canadian Minister of Indian Affairs, stated that residential schools were envisioned as places that would “elevate the Indian from his condition of savagery.”¹³ One century later, charged with researching the residential schools and informing the public, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) has shown that the schools served to permanently alter the children’s “relationships to the land, language, religion, family relations, educational practices, morality, and social customs.”¹⁴ KIRS was no different.

In 1896, KIRS principal A. M. Carion articulated the idealized outcome for children attending the institution: “We keep constantly before their mind the object which the Government has in view in carrying on the industrial-schools, which is to civilize the Indians, to make them good, useful, and law-abiding members of society.”¹⁵ At one point the most prominent residential school in Canada, KIRS serves as a relevant case study when looking into the history of government-backed assimilation institutions, especially given the recent discovery of 215 unmarked graves on its property. KIRS was located alongside the South Thompson River, just three kilometers from the Kamloops city center. It was constructed in 1890 and originally housed up to 25 male and 25 female students at a time.¹⁶ The school operated from 1893 until 1978, with attendance soaring to 500 in the 1950s.¹⁷

KIRS was a Catholic school, so nuns of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (a congregation founded in 1816) staffed the school. In their interviews, many former students dubbed them the “black coats.”¹⁸ Various Christian denominations were running schools, reflecting the diverse religious groups in Canada due to the flight of English Presbyterians, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, and Catholics from the United States after the American Revolution.¹⁹ That said, it should be noted that the Canadian government took over the

¹³ Quoted in Milloy, *Suffer the Little Children*, 9.

¹⁴ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, vol. 1, *Canada’s Residential Schools: The History, Part 1, Origins to 1939* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015) 26, [online](#).

¹⁵ A. M. Carion to Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, August 1, 1896, in *Dominion of Canada Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended 30th June 1896* (Ottawa: S. E. Dawson, 1897), 607, [online](#).

¹⁶ A. M. Carion to Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, August 1, 1896, in *Dominion of Canada Annual Report*, 604.

¹⁷ “Kamloops (St. Louis),” *National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation*, [online](#).

¹⁸ Evelyn Camille, speech, KIRS Le Estcwéy (The Missing) Findings Presentation and TteS Next Steps, Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc Special Assembly, in “B.C. First Nation Releases Report on Unmarked Graves Discovered in Kamloops,” cpac, streamed July 15, 2021, video, [online](#).

¹⁹ “Discover Canada: Canada’s History,” *Government of Canada*, October 26, 2015, [online](#).

responsibility for all residential schools in 1883.²⁰ Yet, despite this, the schools remained firmly rooted in Christian moral doctrine.

Spreading Christianity to the First Nations justified the concept of the empire itself, as it gave the British a reason to seize land far from their Isles. Thus, Christian missionaries were vital to both the British Empire in general and the residential school system in particular. This is not to say that missionaries were not devoted to the idea that they were bringing salvation to the First Nations, or that they did not fully believe their mission was kind and righteous. Missionaries were often powerful voices for securing federal aid when needed and keeping settlers in check by treating the First Nations respectfully.²¹ By the same token, missionaries were human and frequently just as responsible for colonization's most painful and long-lasting consequences as the government itself.

KIRS students faced attacks on their identities from the school's nuns and pastors, and they were punished for adhering to any traditions passed on to them by their mothers and grandmothers. Children aged four to sixteen were made to shed their family ties and identities, embrace Catholicism, and assimilate into Euro-Canadian society. Their health was compromised, both physically and mentally, with the principal complaining that the school was not receiving enough funding to feed the children and noted sexual predators "serving" on the institution's staff roster.²² However, to understand the extent to which the Indigenous children were stripped of their heritage, it is necessary to understand the culture they were coming from.

Most of the children brought to Kamloops were of the Secwépemc people, a First Nations group of seventeen separate bands who historically inhabited around 145,000 square kilometers of land in the interior of British Columbia, Canada.²³ They spoke Secwepemctsin, a language of the Salish linguistic family that was widespread along the western shores of Canada and the United States, from British Columbia down to modern-day Oregon.²⁴ British settlers had difficulty pronouncing Secwepemctsin; they therefore anglicized the name of this Indigenous language to "Shuswap;" however, there has been a recent movement to restore the proper term to its use.²⁵

²⁰ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Final Report*, 25.

²¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Final Report*, 26.

²² Ken Favrholt, "Kamloops History: The Dark and Difficult Legacy of the Kamloops Indian Residential School," *Kamloops This Week*, October 7, 2020, [online](#); Andrea Woo, "Glen Jack Experienced the Horrors of the Kamloops Residential School: He's Been Trying to Get People to Listen for 50 Years," *The Globe and Mail*, July 17, 2021, [online](#).

²³ "Secwepemcúl'ecw (Secwépemc)," *Native Land Digital*, August 15, 2022, [online](#).

²⁴ David Beck, review of *The Salish Language Family: Reconstructing Syntax*, by Paul D. Kroeber, *American Anthropologist* 103, no. 3 (September 2001): 849–850.

²⁵ Marianne Ignace and Mona Jules, *Secwepemctsin: A Beginners Level Course, Workbook to Accompany Secwepemctsin CD-ROM#1* (Kamloops: Secwepemc Cultural Education Soc., 2002), 7.

The Secwépemc people were partially nomadic: they inhabited partly subterranean “pit houses” during the winter and moved into above-ground domiciles made from reeds in the warmer months.²⁶ Secwépemc elders referred to the aforementioned pit-houses as *c7ístkten*; they were often large enough to accommodate four to five families.²⁷

Spirituality was a significant part of Secwépemc life. In her 1981 monograph *The Cariboo Mission: A History of the Oblates*, historian Margaret Whitehead has this to say about two of the essential spirits: “The Old-One...was all powerful...The Old-One had as his chief assistant a spirit called Coyote. Coyote was sent by the Old-One to travel over the world and put it to rights.”²⁸ The Secwépemc people also practiced a form of animism in their daily lives, as their connection to the Earth itself was considered paramount. An example of this was their reverence of the hand drum. In a 2011 article published by the *Canadian Journal for Native Studies*, Indigenous Studies scholar and member of the Secwepemc nation Georgina Martin explains that the hand drum was inherently tied to the land, given the animal hide and wood used to create it; as for the hand drum’s spiritual significance, the “Secwepemc people acknowledge how the animals are sacrificed for the hide, and they pay homage to the animal’s spirit. The trees are nourishment...The trees provide shelter, medicine and transportation.”²⁹ The hand drum’s sound was also spiritually connected to the Earth. When many drums were played together, the sound was considered so moving and memorable because it “resonate[d] with the heartbeat of Mother Earth.”³⁰

Secwépemc culture revered personal qualities such as “humility, honesty, respect, [and] responsibility,” and significant community leaders were chosen based on these attributes.³¹ Their social lives were full: Secwépemc extended families were typically large and led by a grandparent, and everybody contributed to the household duties. Wisdom was passed down through the generations via stories and legends, thereby sustaining a rich oral tradition.³² Many former KIRS students fondly remember their lives before they were sent to residential schools.

²⁶ Ken Favrholt, “History: The Secwépemc C7ístkten or Winter Home,” *Kamloops This Week*, July 26, 2022, [online](#).

²⁷ Favrholt, “History,” [online](#). The numeral 7 is a placeholder character for a glottal stop and is seen in many English written forms of First Nations languages.

²⁸ Margaret Whitehead, *The Cariboo Mission: A History of the Oblates* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1981), 64.

²⁹ Georgina Martin, “Drumming My Way Home: A Secwepemc Perspective,” *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 31, no. 2 (2011): 110.

³⁰ Martin, “Drumming My Way Home,” 110.

³¹ Martin, “Drumming My Way Home,” 109.

³² Celia Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002), 43, ProQuest Ebook Central.

Many interviewees also describe the anger they felt toward their families when the cattle truck arrived to take them away.³³

Upon arriving at KIRS, children were divided on the basis of age and sex. Siblings were split up and not allowed to speak to or even acknowledge each other, as related by residential school survivor Hector Macdonald: “When my sister would walk around the block, I would wave at her and get a strap for it.”³⁴ If deemed necessary, staff members would give the children new names, and they assigned each child a number corresponding to their order in the student lineup. Many students report being referred to by number alone, erasing their individuality and personhood.³⁵

The residential schools’ first and most immediate impact on the children’s lives was isolation from their families. Secwépemc culture was highly family-oriented, thus, transitioning from being surrounded by family to sleeping in a crowded bunk room filled with strangers was an intense adjustment for many.³⁶ The children of Kamloops—and residential schools in general—were allowed to see their families only on Christmas and during the summer holidays.³⁷ They were allowed to write letters to their family, but many survivors allege that the letters were tampered with to remove negative remarks.³⁸

Another immediate obstacle that the children had to face was the language barrier. Banning traditional languages was integral to the effort to strip Indigenous children of their culture and transform them into good Canadian citizens. Children at Kamloops were permitted to speak their Indigenous language for two months; after this period, they were expected to speak English only or risk punishment. A 2015 article published in the *National Post* refers to an interview with a survivor: “Peter Nakogee told the commission that when he attended a residential school in Fort Albany, Ontario, he spoke no English. When he was told to write down his name, he angered a nun because he only knew how to write in Cree syllabics. And then he identified himself only by the name Ministik, for which he was whipped.”³⁹ Banning the use of the children’s first language was not merely an attempt to address the challenge of learning English; it also served to further distance the children from their cultural identity, making re-assimilation into their original family unit difficult.⁴⁰

³³ Webster, “Living Nightmare,” [online](#).

³⁴ Webster, “Living Nightmare,” [online](#).

³⁵ Woo, “Glen Jack,” [online](#).

³⁶ Webster, “Living Nightmare,” [online](#).

³⁷ Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal*, 85–86.

³⁸ Camille, speech, July 15, 2021, [online](#).

³⁹ Douglas Quan, “‘Assault’ on Residential School Students’ Identities Began the Moment They Stepped Inside,” *National Post*, June 2, 2015, [online](#).

⁴⁰ Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal*, 117.

Most of the instruction provided to the students at KIRS was grounded in Catholicism. Mass was a daily event, but it was incomprehensible to most students since, in the early years of KIRS, it was still being celebrated in Latin.⁴¹ English was difficult enough for the children, but Latin was simply foreign to them. Due to the work of Christian missionaries, Catholicism was already known to many Secwépemc bands. In interviews, many survivors of Kamloops never “spoke negatively of their experience with [Catholicism] before school.”⁴² This was because, in an effort to make the religion more compatible with traditional Secwépemc spirituality, “priests seem to have de-emphasized the concepts of guilt, confession, and forgiveness.”⁴³ Furthermore, the fundamental doctrines of Catholicism fit in neatly with Secwépemc beliefs, with Christian missionaries relating the Secwépemc figure “The Old-One” as a stand-in for God and the figure of “Coyote” as a stand-in for Jesus. Just as ancient missionaries had absorbed various religious holidays into Christianity, these more modern missionaries noted that the Secwépemc people had mid-winter and mid-summer holidays and introduced them to Christmas and Easter instead.⁴⁴

However, the religious teaching was entirely different once the children reached KIRS. Survivors describe the emphasis that the school’s nuns placed on teaching shame and guilt: “[we] would go to hell and burn for eternity if we did not listen to their way of teaching.”⁴⁵ In a speech at a Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc presentation, survivor Evelyn Camille recalls: “I was ashamed to be Secwépemc.”⁴⁶ This sentiment of shame, tied into Catholic doctrine, contributed to the school’s mission to alienate the children from their Indigenous identity. One survivor spoke of the guilt imparted to her as a child and the impact that the religious teachings had on her relationship with her family: “They [i.e., the nuns] said... ‘anybody that doesn’t go to church is a pagan.’ I started thinking, ‘Hey, my parents don’t go to church all the time. They must be pagans’... People that got drunk, they would really put them down. I thought, ‘Gee, our family is really the pits.’ And I’d go home, and I’d be really ashamed of my parents.”⁴⁷ Such teaching was deliberate. Training the children to believe that their own families were wrong and sinful was intended to cause them to shed their ethnic identity willingly and join Euro-Canadian society. Many survivors report that it took them years to unlearn the guilt placed on their shoulders as children.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal*, 59.

⁴² Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal*, 59.

⁴³ Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal*, 45.

⁴⁴ Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal*, 28.

⁴⁵ Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal*, 59.

⁴⁶ Camille, speech, July 15, 2021, [online](#).

⁴⁷ Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal*, 63.

⁴⁸ Ian Austen, “My Most Memorable Interview With a Residential School Survivor,” *New York Times*, July 30, 2021, [online](#).

In every interview with survivors, hunger emerges as one of the most common themes. Shirley Paul, who attended the school for five years in the early 1950s, recalls that she “didn’t know what starvation was until she attended the institution.”⁴⁹ Paul describes a reality where stealing food became common among many children. One time, she and another student were “so hungry [that they] ate potato peels and got caught,” for which they were struck with “the strap.”⁵⁰ The children were practically driven to stealing food in order to survive, which further broke their spirits, diminished their sense of personal dignity, and contributed to their loss of identity.

The meals provided at KIRS were not just of less than stellar quality (to say nothing more of quantity); they were another instance of the school dissociating the children from their culture. While the children were used to the rich traditional Secwépemc diet of smoked salmon or trout, herring roe, salted wild game, sweet potatoes, and various berries, the meals at KIRS paled in comparison.⁵¹ For many interviewed survivors, the morning meal at KIRS was the most memorable, as it was always the same—lumpy porridge prepared by the students. Survivors describe the porridge’s inconsistent quality: some mornings it was improperly stirred, leaving it burnt, while other mornings the water it was cooked in was not hot enough, leaving it sticky.⁵² The absence of traditional foods further chipped away at the children’s ties to their family and culture, and it impacted their bodies as they were not getting the nutrition they needed. This is evident in the disparity between the students’ meals and the staff’s meals. Students who worked in the kitchens noticed the clear divide, and one survivor remarked: “They ate much better food...They were separate from everybody else in one room where the whole staff ate.”⁵³ Not only did the staff receive much better meals; they also took meals away from the children. Thus, inadequate food options wreaked havoc on the student’s physical health just as much as on their mental health. Survivors report losing weight at school while growing and gaining up to ten pounds during one month of summer at home.⁵⁴

Another example of forced dissociation was the banning of traditional Indigenous music and dancing. An 1895 amendment to the Indian Act turned the performance of various traditional dances into misdemeanors, which could land First Nations people who participated in them in jail anywhere from two to six

⁴⁹ Neetu Garcha and Amy Judd, “‘I Kept It Hidden’: Survivor of Kamloops Indian Residential School Speaks for 1st Time,” *Global News*, May 28, 2022, [online](#).

⁵⁰ Garcha and Judd, “I Kept It Hidden,” [online](#).

⁵¹ First Nations Health Authority, *First Nations Traditional Foods Fact Sheets*, August 27, 2014, [online](#).

⁵² Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal*, 60.

⁵³ Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal*, 61.

⁵⁴ Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal*, 62.

months, often with hard labor attached to the sentence.⁵⁵ Following Parliament's example, cultural dances were banned from schools. Instead, survivor Leona Thomas recalls how she was taught "every ethnic dance except my own."⁵⁶ Removing Secwépemc dances from the children's lives severed them from an important way to reconnect with their family members back home during significant events and celebrations. Parliament's criminalization of traditional dances left many frightened to carry out their sacred customs. By the 1950s, due to the efficiency with which residential schools and Parliament had worked together to eradicate traditional dances, many survivors could not remember how to perform Secwépemc dances at all.⁵⁷

For many children, the gradual erosion of their culture during years of attending these schools, compounded with the physical and sexual abuse experienced on school grounds, shattered their sense of self. Principal A. M. Carion wrote of the punishments administered at Kamloops: "A system of marking faults committed has been adopted, and twice a day, at roll call, attention is called to those faults and the wrong-doers are reprimanded, and, if deemed necessary, punished by being confined during recreation or deprived of dessert. Corporal punishment is resorted to only in extreme cases."⁵⁸ Despite this assertion, KIRS survivors consistently tell a different story. They report being beaten with fists, open palm slaps, and being whipped with willow reeds and leather straps, all of which left them black and blue with bruises.⁵⁹ Offenses thus punished ranged from speaking Secwepemctsin to missing a spot on the floor when given a cleaning duty.⁶⁰ In addition, many students mention rampant sexual abuse, which was ignored by those in charge. Glen Jack, who attended KIRS from 1965 until 1969, describes the trauma from the sexual abuse he endured, which he still relives whenever he hears footsteps approaching him. As a child, he would be woken up by the sound of footsteps approaching his bed, soon followed by a priest demanding, "128, get up...Pray for forgiveness for what you made me do to you."⁶¹ Survivor Jeanette Jules relates her memories of a security guard walking into the girls' dormitory at night "with his flashlight, and he'd be flashing it on the girls' faces."⁶² Girls would whimper and cover their faces "because who was he

⁵⁵ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Final Report*, 635–636.

⁵⁶ Leona Thomas, speech, KIRS Le Estcwéy (The Missing) Findings Presentation and TteS Next Steps, Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Special Assembly, in "B.C. First Nation Releases Report on Unmarked Graves Discovered in Kamloops," cpac, streamed July 15, 2021, video, [online](#).

⁵⁷ Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal*, 81–82.

⁵⁸ A. M. Carion to Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, August 1, 1896, in *Dominion of Canada Annual Report*, 607.

⁵⁹ Garcha and Judd, "I Kept It Hidden," [online](#); Woo, "Glen Jack," [online](#).

⁶⁰ Woo, "Glen Jack," [online](#).

⁶¹ Woo, "Glen Jack," [online](#).

⁶² Woo, "Glen Jack," [online](#).

going to choose? Who is he going to decide that he is going to go and take?"⁶³ The stories of sexual abuse are many, and they are difficult to read. Sparking further outrage is the lack of justice. Some supervisors and priests committed these acts unchecked for decades, yet faced at best minimal punishments. One of the supervisors, Gerald Mathieu Moran, worked at KIRS throughout the early 1960s and was notorious for his sexual crimes. He was convicted on twelve different counts, but since he served the sentences concurrently, he was "up for parole within a year."⁶⁴ These instances of repeated abuse, especially Glen Jack's account, exemplify the school staff's apathy, which was generated by the intentional dehumanization of the students entrusted to them. The trauma from these abuses will stay with the survivors for the rest of their lives. As time passes and efforts toward reconciliation intensify, survivors are coming forward to tell their stories and are fighting for them to be heard.

II. Rising Voices

In 1993, the head of the Anglican Church in Canada, Reverend Michael Peers (1934–2023), issued the following statement to apologize for the Anglican residential school system:

I accept, and I confess before God and you, our failures in the residential schools. We failed you. We failed ourselves. We failed God. I am sorry, more than I can say, that we were part of a system which took you and your children from home and family. I am sorry, more than I can say, that we tried to remake you in our image, taking from you your language and the signs of your identity. I am sorry, more than I can say, that in our schools so many were abused physically, sexually, culturally, and emotionally. On behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada, I present our apology.⁶⁵

Public apologies like this are examples of attempts to encourage healing among the survivors of residential schools. In 2007, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was formed to promote education regarding First Nations culture and history. Funded by Parliament, the TRC collaborated with First Nations groups until 2015 to compile interviews with residential school survivors and assemble governmental records remaining from these schools. Their efforts were generally well received, although many saw them as a drop in the bucket in comparison to the generational trauma that many families are still experiencing.⁶⁶

During a Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc press conference on July 15, 2021, three former KIRS students told their stories (all of which have been referenced above),

⁶³ Webster, "Living Nightmare," [online](#).

⁶⁴ Tristin Hopper, "Why So Many Sexual Predators at Indian Residential Schools Escaped Punishment," *National Post*, June 10, 2021, [online](#).

⁶⁵ Michael Peers, Archbishop and Primate (The Anglican Church of Canada), "Apology to Native People: A Message from the Primate, Archbishop Michael Peers, to the National Native Convocation," Minaki, Ontario, Friday, August 6, 1993, [online](#).

⁶⁶ Camille, speech, July 15, 2021, [online](#).

describing in great detail how their experiences at the school forever altered their lives and those of their family members. Evelyn Camille, the first speaker, noted that, despite residential schools being intended to assimilate First Nations students into Euro-Canadian society, after ten years of attendance, she was only testing at a fourth-grade level when she had reached college age.⁶⁷ She tearfully recounted that, prior to her decision to speak at the press conference, her children had no idea of the trauma she had endured. Camille expressed how she “couldn’t” tell them, referencing the deep sense of shame being the only thing she remembered being taught at KIRS.⁶⁸ Finally, she passionately denounced the idea that the 215 potential grave sites on the grounds of the residential school should be excavated and studied, stating, “What good are those studies going to do for us? For an individual? For me?”⁶⁹ This sentiment was echoed throughout the press conference by Secwépemc authorities.

The second speaker, Leona Thomas, who had attended the school from 1958 until 1963, at first refused the opportunity to speak at the event. She explained how difficult it had been for her to be immediately separated from her older brother upon their arrival at KIRS, stating that the nuns did not attempt to “comfort a six-year-old who was crying, wanting to go home, or wanting to be with her brother who she was not allowed to be with.” Thomas urged those listening to her presentation to call on Parliament to act and educate themselves on their community’s wishes regarding the discovery of the gravesites.⁷⁰

The final speaker, Mona Jules, recalled the death of her thirteen-year-old sister at Kamloops. She was said to have passed away from an unknown illness. When their parents were only informed of her sister’s death afterward, they “wanted to know why she wasn’t taken to a doctor, to a hospital. It was right across the bridge, and there were no answers.” Jules confessed that her father attacked the principal in anger over the news.⁷¹ She spoke candidly about her fears regarding what might have happened to her had she not been lucky enough to survive, and whether she could have been among the 215 whose unmarked graves had just been found. Advocates for First Nations groups had been calling for reparations for decades. Only after the gruesome 2021 discovery did their plight finally find its way into the coverage by international media.

The discovery prompted backlash as well as sorrow. According to an article in the *New York Post*, a conservative American tabloid, there were some, like Jacques Rouillard, a professor at the University of Montreal, who demanded proof of the

⁶⁷ Camille, speech, July 15, 2021, [online](#).

⁶⁸ Camille, speech, July 15, 2021, [online](#).

⁶⁹ Camille, speech, July 15, 2021, [online](#).

⁷⁰ Thomas, speech, July 15, 2021, [online](#).

⁷¹ Mona Jules, speech, KIRS Le Estcwéy (The Missing) Findings Presentation and TteS Next Steps, Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc Special Assembly, in “B.C. First Nation Releases Report on Unmarked Graves Discovered in Kamloops,” cpac, streamed July 15, 2021, video, [online](#).

bodies buried at KIRS. Rouillard stated, “They use a lot of words like ‘cultural genocide’...If that’s true, there should be excavations.”⁷² Such sentiments were echoed by other academics, including Tom Flanagan, a professor of Political Science at the University of Calgary, who went so far as to dub the findings “the biggest fake news story in Canadian history” and denounced survivors’ testimonies as the result of coming “to believe things for which there is no evidence.”⁷³ The same newspaper article also featured testimony from a former residential student who claimed he had been “grateful to attend.”⁷⁴ How to respond? The abuses detailed above may not have been universal. However, dismissing the testimonies of dozens of survivors who have bravely shared their trauma is unfounded and intentionally misleading. At the July 15, 2021, press conference, the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc speakers, including their elected chief, expressed their wishes for the bodies at KIRS to remain undisturbed and demanded that the decision be left up to their community.

Conclusion

The history of Canadian residential schools is still being written, and there is little doubt that more revelations will come to light in the future. When analyzing the oral histories, personal accounts, statements given by former employees and government officials, and reports of sexual abuse and crimes, a strong case for cultural genocide emerges. The facts are plain: the Canadian Parliament, following the precedent set by the British Empire, sponsored institutions that transparently aimed to “kill the Indian in the child” by severing their family ties, eradicating their language, changing their names, criminalizing their cultural activities, forcefully converting them, and committing violence to force compliance.⁷⁵ These institutions are not a remote stain on Canada’s history, as the last residential school officially closed in 1997. Residential schools are not a phenomenon of the distant past. They are a part of Canada’s modern history, and many of their victims are still alive and demand to be heard. We would be remiss not to listen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Rielly K. Orrell of Riverside, California, earned his B.A. in History (2023) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF). He is currently pursuing an M.A. in History at CSUF. The article published above originated in a seminar on the History of the British Empire offered by CSUF’s Department of History.*

⁷² See Dana Kennedy, “‘Biggest Fake News Story in Canada’: Kamloops Mass Grave Debunked by Academics,” *New York Post*, May 29, 2022, [online](#).

⁷³ See Kennedy, “Biggest Fake News Story in Canada,” [online](#).

⁷⁴ See Kennedy, “Biggest Fake News Story in Canada,” [online](#).

⁷⁵ Webster, “Living Nightmare,” [online](#).