



Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce: A Story of Courage

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Introduction

Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce was a Canadian doctor and a leader in the field of Public Health at the turn of the 20th century. He wrote Canada's first Health Code for the province of Ontario in 1884. He later served as president of the American Public Health Association and was a founding member of the Canadian Public Health Association (FNCFCS, 2016).

Dr. Bryce was also a member of the Canadian Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis, which was his area of expertise (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Today, 100 years after his career as a doctor, Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce is most recognized for his persistence in advocating for better health conditions for Aboriginal children living in Indian Residential Schools (Bryce, 2012).

In 1904, after years of work in Public Health, Dr. Bryce was hired to work as Chief Medical Officer for the federal government. He played an important role in Canadian history as a "whistleblower", someone who documented and released evidence of the rate of Aboriginal children who were dying in residential schools. Dr. Bryce spoke out against the people who were running these schools, including the Canadian government, because these people knew about these deaths and had the means to save many lives but failed to take adequate action (Deachman, 2015).

The story of Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce is an important part of our history and demonstrates to us the importance of speaking out for what is right and just, even when it is difficult to do so.

"The Bryce Report" of 1907

As part of his work as the Medical Inspector to the Department of the Interior and Indian Affairs, Dr. Bryce was asked to inspect residential schools (also called industrial or boarding schools) located in Western Canada and to report back on the sanitary conditions of these schools. In 1907, Dr. Bryce visited 35 residential schools and found that the schools were overcrowded and poorly ventilated, conditions known at the time to facilitate the spread of tuberculosis and other diseases among students. He found a clear connection between the sanitation and health

conditions within the schools and the incredible number of child deaths (Milloy, 1999).

After inspecting these schools, Dr. Bryce wrote his 1907 "Report on the Indian Schools of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories" which is commonly known as "The Bryce Report". Dr. Bryce used a survey to gather information from school principals about the health history of children in these schools, and he reported:

It suffices for us to know... that of a total of 1,537 pupils reported upon nearly 25 per cent are dead, of one school with an absolutely accurate statement, 69 per cent of ex-pupils are dead, and that everywhere the almost invariable cause of death given is tuberculosis (Bryce, 1907, p.18).

Further evidence from Dr. Bryce's inspections suggested that the numbers of student deaths over time were much higher, when taking into account that many children died shortly after leaving the schools (Milloy, 1999). In addition to bringing attention to the incredibly high death rates and poor health conditions in residential schools, Dr. Bryce also made it clear that the people running the schools – the churches and the Canadian government – were responsible for the health of these children.

In his 1907 report, Bryce writes:

It is apparent that...the old-fashioned buildings, their very varied and imperfect methods of heating and an almost complete lack of knowledge of the meaning of ventilation and of methods for accomplishing it in the different schools, that are responsible for this most serious condition which has been demonstrated and which demands for immediate remedy (p.19).

In reflecting upon the lack of proper ventilation in residential schools which contributed to tuberculosis infections and deaths among the students, Dr. Bryce also wrote "We have created a situation so dangerous to health that I was often surprised that the results were not even worse than they have been shown statistically to be" (Bryce, 1907, p. 19).

Dr. Bryce documented the alarming rates of student deaths in Indian

Residential Schools and outlined clear recommendations to prevent unnecessary student deaths. Among his recommendations, Dr. Bryce called for the reform of the residential school system, including changes to ensure that “the health interests of the pupils be guarded by a proper medical inspection and that the local physicians be encouraged through the provision at each school of fresh air methods in the care and treatment of cases of tuberculosis” (Milloy, 1999, p. 93).

The 1907 report was distributed to Members of Parliament and to the churches (Milloy, 1999). On November 15, 1907, the front page of “The Evening Citizen” newspaper (now called The Ottawa Citizen) included an article on Bryce’s report. The title read: “Schools Aid White Plague - Startling Death Rolls Revealed Among Indians - Absolute Inattention to the Bare Necessities of Health” (Evening Citizen, 1907). Similar stories also appeared in the Saturday Night magazine and the Montreal Star newspaper (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). In reporting this to the media, Dr. Bryce briefly brought the issue to the attention of a wide audience of people across Canada. Although Parliamentarians, scholars and activists as well as thousands of ordinary citizens surely read these articles, it did not lead to any concrete change and the government continued on with business as usual. The churches and the federal government, the people who were in charge of running residential schools, were well aware of the numbers of children dying within the schools and the causes of their deaths.

For example, Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce called repeatedly upon Duncan Campbell Scott, federal Deputy Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs, to improve conditions in the schools to prevent unnecessary illness and death amongst the children who attended them. Duncan Campbell Scott made it clear that he understood the extent of the death rates in residential schools, and once estimated that “fifty per cent of the children who passed through these schools did not live to benefit from the education which they had received therein” (Milloy, 1999, p. 51). Duncan Campbell Scott and other bureaucrats working for the Department of Indian Affairs made deliberate decisions to disregard Dr. Bryce’s findings and recommendations and to continue with the assimilation policy of residential schools. Duncan Campbell Scott wrote:

It is readily acknowledged that Indian children lose their natural resistance to illness by habituating so closely in the residential schools and that they die at a much higher rate than in their villages. But this does not justify a change in the policy of this Department which is geared towards a final solution of our Indian Problem (BC Teachers’ Federation, 2015, p.8).

Dr. Bryce was not the only person at this time to raise the alarm about residential schools and to speak out about the government’s inaction to protect Aboriginal children. For example, the Honorable Samuel Hugh

Blake, an influential judge and member of the Anglican community, described the state of residential schools to the Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs: “The appalling number of deaths among the younger children appeals loudly to the guardians of our Indians. In doing nothing to obviate the preventable causes of death, brings the Department within unpleasant nearness to the charge of manslaughter” (Milloy, 1999, p. 77).

In these challenging circumstances, Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce worked tirelessly to urge the government and the public to pay attention to this pressing issue. However, Dr. Bryce’s recommendations for improvements to residential schools came into direct conflict with Duncan Campbell Scott’s work to reduce the spending of the Department of Indian Affairs. In 1913, Duncan Campbell Scott suspended the funding for Bryce’s research on child deaths in residential schools and blocked Dr. Bryce’s presentations of his research findings at academic conferences. Further, Dr. Bryce was denied positions within the federal civil service for which he was eminently qualified (Bryce, 1922). The federal government forced Dr. Bryce out of public service and into retirement in 1921. At this time, he was again able to speak out publicly about the health conditions of Aboriginal children in residential schools and the government’s role in perpetuating these deaths.

An Advocate for Aboriginal Children's Health

In 1922, Dr. Bryce wrote a book “The Story of a National Crime: An Appeal for Justice to the Indians of Canada”. This book provides clear evidence of the government’s role in creating and maintaining conditions that led to the huge number of student deaths. In particular, this book outlined the fact that the government had chosen not to take any action since Bryce’s original report in 1907. In his 1922 book, Dr. Bryce draws attention once again to the failure of the government to act: “[In the schools, a] trail of disease and death has gone almost unchecked by any serious efforts on the part of the Department of Indian Affairs” (Milloy, 1999, p. 51).

Despite this evidence, the number of residential schools in Canada continued to increase in the decades to follow. Thousands of children continued to live in unsafe buildings, with high infection rates of tuberculosis, under the power of a government that was not willing to spend more money to make sure that the children were safe (Milloy, 1999). In total, there were over 130 different residential schools located across Canada, with the last federally supported school operating until the late 1990s (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

The people working in the Department of Indian Affairs held within

their power the ability to make decisions about funding, inspections and regulations that could have changed the health conditions for children living in residential schools. In reality, these people failed to act to protect children from illness and death, despite Dr. Bryce's incessant encouragement. What was so remarkable about Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce was his ability to boldly speak out about the injustices that witnessed and the rights of Aboriginal children, even when few others were doing the same.

The Legacy of a Hero

Dr. Bryce acted as a witness to the unnecessary suffering of Aboriginal children in Canada, and held the government and churches to account for creating and maintaining the conditions that led to children's deaths. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Final Report on Canada's Residential schools includes a section about Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce, the contributions of his 1907 report and the recommendations that he put forward to the federal government (2015, p. 401-407).

Although the government deliberately chose not to act upon his recommendations, Bryce's work can help us understand what conditions were like in these residential schools and allow us to recognize the consequences of the actions (and inactions) of the government and churches who ran these schools. Dr. Bryce provided evidence of child death and disease in residential schools and exposed the truth when few others were willing to talk about it (BC Teachers' Federation, 2015).

In 2015, a Historical Plaque was erected at Dr. Bryce's gravesite in the Beechwood Cemetery in Ottawa, Ontario, to honour his work in standing up for the health and rights of Aboriginal children. Cindy Blackstock says that "[o]ther people need to be inspired by Bryce's example of being courageous. Bryce had the moral courage to stand up for the kids and take all the pushback that comes with that. Bryce really confronts us with the reality that people knew then about the harms, had a choice to make it different, and that there were people like him who spoke out" (Deachman, 2015).

The story of Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce is about the strength of people who make a choice to stand up for what is right for children in a peaceful and respectful way, even when faced with doubt and criticism. The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society honours Dr. Bryce's achievement and struggles by championing the Peter Henderson Bryce Award. This award is given out every two years to recognize children and adults who advocate for the safety, health or well-being of First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and youth.

"We want others to follow his example by having the courage to stand up for the right thing and help this generation of First Nations, Métis and Inuit children and youth to have the same chance to succeed as other children and youth in Canada" (FNCFCS, 2016).

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