

RECONCILING HISTORY

How a Cemetery Breathed Life Into Reconciliation

CINDY BLACKSTOCK, ED BIANCHI AND SYLVIA SMITH SHOW THAT IT IS BETTER TO IMPROVE HOW WE TEACH FUTURE GENERATIONS, RATHER THAN TRYING TO FORGET THE PAST



Front page of Ottawa's The Evening Citizen from November 15, 1907 (upper right) with the story detailing Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce's report on the deplorable conditions at Indian boarding schools in Manitoba and the Northwest. *Public domain*

What should be done with historic symbols of discrimination? Destroy them, hide them, outlaw them or contextualize them? At a time when there are growing calls to remove colonial names and symbols from public spaces throughout North America, this article describes how the burial places of key figures involved in the internment of First Nations, Inuit and Métis children into colonial, and often abusive, residential schools are being transformed to promote public education and reconciliation.

Beechwood Cemetery in Ottawa, Canada is the resting place for one of Canada's greatest moral battles. In 1907, Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce, an avid gardener, physician and former president of the American Public Health Association, blew the whistle on the Government of Canada's failure to prevent children in the schools from dying at a rate of 25% per year. Dr. Bryce was convinced that equitable health care, proper

nutrition, improved ventilation and less over-crowding would have saved thousands of lives. The price of Bryce's reforms? About \$10,000 in a country boasting an annual budget exceeding \$100 million. Over the hill from where Bryce is buried lies the notorious Duncan Campbell Scott, a musician, Confederate Poet and the federal bureaucrat who refused to implement Bryce's reforms, choosing instead to launch a vigorous retaliation campaign against Dr. Bryce, eventually

pushing him into retirement in 1922 and erasing him from Canadian history books.

Scott oversaw the residential school file for over 52 years, was lauded by the Canadian Government upon his retirement, and was named “a Person of National Historical Influence”. During his tenure, Scott received numerous reports about child deaths and abuses in the schools and routinely ignored the reports or hid them. When public alarm made those two options impossible

– Scott would take perfunctory action to create the illusion of reform without addressing the core problem. Thousands of children died in the schools and many were abused under Scott’s watch. In the closest thing to a lament, Scott told his editor just before he died that he had “never done anything courageous in my entire life”.

Buried midway between Bryce and Scott is Nicholas Flood Davin. A lawyer by training and a journalist and politician by choice,

he was dispatched by Prime Minister John A. MacDonald to study Carlisle Industrial School for Native American children in Pennsylvania and assess the suitability of such a program in Canada. Davin’s 1879 report lays the government’s strategy bare – separate children from their families, or as Davin put it, “the influence of the wigwam”, assimilate them into Christian culture, and deploy them into a life of menial work. Prime Minister MacDonald welcomed the report and directed

SEVEN KEY FACTORS TO ACHIEVING SUCCESS

1 RECOGNIZE THE HEROES AND THE WRONGDOERS OF HISTORICAL PERIODS EQUALLY

This project began as an effort to acknowledge a man who had been undeservedly tarnished and then forgotten in Canadian history. Telling the stories of Bryce and Scott together is not only historically accurate – it strips away the argument that people of the period did not know better. Bryce and Scott both knew better; Bryce did better; Scott chose not to.

2 COMMITMENT TO ACCURACY

Revising memorial plaques is simple, but profound. A few words can transform public understanding of a person’s place in history, so accuracy is vital.

3 TRANSFORM HISTORY INTO EDUCATION

While revising memorial plaques to help people understand a person’s place in history is a crucial first step, it is critical that the plaques be nested in a broader educational effort such as including accurate historical accounts in elementary and secondary curriculum.

4 PARTNERS

Recognize the importance of partners and choose your partners wisely. You can’t do it by yourself. Don’t try to “own” the project. Share the idea and bring in others who understand the value and can bring diverse expertise and networks to the endeavor.

5 DON'T WAIT

The mists of time are filled with great ideas that withered and died because people waited for funding or for everything to be “perfect” before moving forward. It is important to know that *Reconciling History* succeeded without a funder. We knew it was important and made it happen.

6 VALUES

Our goal was to inform reconciliation, so it was critical that we embodied the values espoused by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in our work. This meant that we took all possible steps to ensure the plaques were balanced, accurate and unveiled in ways that reflected the dignity of the occasion.

7 LINK TO CONTEMPORARY INJUSTICES

Canadian students are now learning about Dr. Bryce and Scott in ways that inform their analysis of the Canadian Human Rights Case on First Nations child welfare and other injustices that Indigenous peoples experience. Students are inspired to research, think critically and take peaceful action to redress the injustices.

The next step is to expand the project out of the cemetery to erect information plaques at historical locations relevant to the residential school story in adjoining communities and to create a digital reconciliation tour. *Reconciling History* is an example of how a balanced telling of history can be leveraged to prepare this generation of learners to actively engage in reconciliation and address contemporary injustices facing Indigenous peoples in Canada.

the founding of residential schools in Canada. The last school closed in 1996.

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released its report on Canada's residential schools, noting that at least 150,000 First Nations, Metis and Inuit children attended, and where some 4,000 to 6,000 died. The TRC said the residential schools amounted to "cultural genocide" and called on Canadians to learn from the past and address the outstanding injustices faced by First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples today.

In 2008, 101 years after Bryce's scathing review of children's health in residential schools appeared on the front page of Ottawa's *Evening Citizen* newspaper, First Nations children's advocate Cindy Blackstock stood before his grave with a bouquet of brightly colored daisies representing the joyousness of the children he tried to save. A year earlier, Blackstock filed a landmark human rights case against the Government of Canada for its contemporary discrimination against First Nations children. It all centered on Canada's long-standing practice of providing less funding for all public services to First Nations children on reserves than other Canadian children. To Cindy and other First Nations leaders and scholars these inequalities fuel the over-representation of First Nations children in child welfare, juvenile justice, youth suicide and school dropouts.

The Canadian government had known about the inequalities for decades and had responded in much the same way Duncan Campbell Scott did – ignored, hid or took only perfunctory action. The human rights case was filed as a last resort by the Assembly of First Nations, a political

organization of all First Nations in Canada, and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, a national NGO for First Nations children where Cindy served as Executive Director. The case was highly contested, with the Government of Canada bringing at least 8 motions for dismissal before the evidence could be heard. Retaliation was also part of Canada's strategy. Within 30 days of filing the case, the federal government cut the Caring Society's core funding, and several years later, the Canadian government was found to be willfully and recklessly retaliating against the Executive Director for filing the complaint. In 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal substantiated the complaint and ordered Canada to cease its discriminatory conduct. Since then, the Tribunal has issued four non-compliance orders against Canada. The Government of Canada's response under the current Liberal government has been to welcome the complaint and do very little to comply; in other words, to perpetuate the discrimination.

The synergies between the story of Bryce and Scott in the early 1900s and the story of Canada's treatment of First Nations children demonstrates that reconciliation must move beyond *describing* the past to *learning* from the past. Cindy realized the power of Bryce's story on that first visit in 2008, but was not sure how to raise his memory from the dead in ways that transformed him into a contemporary teacher. She continued to visit his grave as the human rights case progressed. After a couple of years, she noticed Beechwood Cemetery workers putting up "Great Canadian" historical plaques and knew Bryce should have one. She didn't know it then, but this marked the beginning of a remarkable,

collaborative initiative that would later be called *Reconciling History*.

The Bryce plaque was unveiled in 2014 and Project of Heart, which supports educators to teach about residential schools in elementary and secondary schools, ensured Bryce's story was embedded in elementary school curriculum. Before too long, Bryce's picture began to appear on "walls of heroes" in schools across Canada.

Unlike Bryce, Duncan Campbell Scott had a "Great Canadian" plaque recounting his literary contributions and awards, but saying nothing about his role in residential schools. In 2015, Duncan Campbell Scott's plaque was revised to include the words "confederate poet and cultural genocide". It is tempting to paint his legacy with a dark black brush given his direct role in the deaths of thousands of children, but to do so only perpetuates historical social engineering we were trying to correct. The full story of a person must be told so we recognize Scott's contributions to literature in the same plaque as his contributions to cultural genocide. In many ways, including both makes him a better teacher for this generation because as we look at him – we can see the textures of evil and the role of moral cowardice in wrongdoing.

In 2017, a plaque recognizing Nicholas Davin's role in launching the residential school program was unveiled. Attention to presenting a balanced history was vital. Davin was recognized for his journalistic contributions and for getting the tragic ball of residential schools rolling.

Successful transition of historical plaques into school curriculum and other public education initiatives led to the development of the Reconciling History project that seeks to contemporize lessons

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A 2018 photo of Peter Henderson Bryce's grave in Ottawa's Beechwood Cemetery, where high school students placed a poem and orange shirt (in honour of residential school survivors). According to Beechwood Cemetery, Bryce's grave is amongst the most visited.

Photo courtesy Evan Thornton

of history in ways that make contemporary injustices to Indigenous peoples visible and incentivize people to take meaningful action.

As is the case with so many successful projects, this one started with a great team that included Beechwood Cemetery, the Caring Society, historian Dr. John Milloy, Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner, Marie Wilson, Project of Heart and KAIROS, a national coalition of churches and religious organizations that promote human rights. *Em*

CINDY BLACKSTOCK is a member of the Gitksan First Nation, is an Indigenous child rights and reconciliation advocate. She serves as the Executive Director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society and a Professor at McGill University.

ED BIANCHI is currently the Program Manager at KAIROS and has worked for over 30 years with Indigenous peoples to educate and advocate on Indigenous history and rights.

SYLVIA SMITH has been an educator for over 30 years. Through collaborations with her students, she created Project of Heart, an Indian Residential School Commemoration project which garnered her a Governor General's Teaching Award. She has also been recognized by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as an Honorary Witness.