

We are Finding the 2800 Missing Children

By Brian Giesbrecht

It has been claimed that many thousands of indigenous children were ripped from their parents' arms and taken to residential schools, never to be seen again, and buried there in unmarked graves. This article reviews government and historical records which dispel that myth.

From truth comes reconciliation.

The “secret graves” and “missing children” narrative had our national flag [flying at half-mast](#) for over five months after an obscure indigenous politician made the startling claim that she “knew” that [215 indigenous children](#) had been secretly buried in the “apple orchard” on their Kamloops reserve.

Chief Rosanne Casimir said she “knew” this because “Knowledge Keepers” told her of “oral histories” of 6 year olds being hauled from their beds at the Kamloops Indian Residential School (KIRS) in the middle of the night to bury fellow students in the “apple orchard”.

But since that startling announcement, we have learned of problems with that claim. It appears that the claim that the “remains of 215 children, some as young as three years old” were found is a conspiracy theory that has been floating around for the last 30 or so years. More on that later.

But the more sophisticated audience, that doesn't really believe that thousands of indigenous children were massacred and secretly buried by the light of the moon, is still swayed by claims that death rates from disease at residential schools were vastly higher than on the reserves of that era. But is that true?

Canadian health at the turn of the 20th century

In answering that question, it's important to keep in mind that death rates from disease a century ago were shockingly high compared to death rates today. Families were fortunate if babies survived birth, and all their children reached the age of five.

Tuberculosis (TB) was a leading cause of death, but there were other deadly diseases. Forty-two Ukrainian children, for example, died of scarlet fever and measles near Rossburn, Manitoba in 1899. It was winter, and the children died so quickly that digging individual graves in the frozen ground was too difficult, so their little bodies were buried in a [mass grave](#). Such was life in those early years.

Just down the road from that sad place is the Waywayseecappo Reserve, or Lizard Point, as it was once called. We don't know how many children from that reserve died during that scarlet fever epidemic. Or in any of the many epidemics that followed.

In those early times indigenous people were at much greater risk of death from many common diseases than European Canadians who had had centuries to develop resistance. Entire indigenous communities were carried away by smallpox and other diseases, and even influenza, which temporarily sickened the general

population every year, was often fatal for indigenous children.

As Daschuk explains in "[Clearing the Plains](#)", although TB was a leading cause of death for all Canadians, it was much deadlier in the indigenous population. When the federal government took over the residential schools in 1883, the Plains Indians had lost their primary source of protein, the buffalo, and barely adequate government rations were the only thing that stood between them and starvation. The CPR had not been completed, and rudimentary supplies were brought from Fort Benning, Montana, by wagon train. Bacon, flour and beans, some of it almost indigestible to once proud Indians accustomed to the lean and tasty buffalo, barely kept them alive.

The poor diet weakened their immune systems, and crowded one room shacks and lack of sanitation turned the reserves into breeding grounds for disease.

Enter Dr Bryce

Dr. Peter Bryce, Medical Inspector for the Department of the Interior and the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), took note of the problem of disease both on the reserves and in the residential schools. In the DIA Annual Report for 1906 he claimed that the indigenous population of Canada was declining, despite a high birth rate. He ascribed the decline to disease, estimating that "the Indian population of Canada has a [mortality rate](#) of more than double that of the whole population, and in some provinces more than three times", and that "the one dominating cause of the excessive mortality everywhere is this lack of sanitary knowledge or of how to live in houses, and that the death-rate is due to the same cause, [tuberculosis](#)".

Throughout his career, Bryce repeated the claim that living conditions on the reserves were the direct cause of the spread of TB within the reserves, and from thence to the residential schools. In 1906 he wrote of the filthy and crowded houses from which "[infected children have been received into schools](#)" and explained that "owing to the simple habits of the Indian, common to all people at their stage, visiting from house to house is a chief feature of the day's occupation, and the sick are visited or go visiting, and through their expectorations serve to steadily spread the infection".

In the 1913 DIA Annual Report he claimed that [more tubercular infection was transmitted via filthy floors](#) than in any other way, and in 1922 in "The Story of a National Crime" he stated that in a study of 8 schools in Alberta "tuberculosis was present equally in children at every age" and that "In no instance was a child awaiting admission to school found free from tuberculosis; hence it was plain that [infection was got in the home primarily](#)".

Although the problems Bryce identified were indeed real, his claim that the Indian population was declining is contradicted by census data. The DIA Annual Report for 1909 stated that "the [increase of the Indian population](#) throughout the Dominion . . . has been some 838", and that "The general health of the Indians seems to have been quite equal to, where not rather above, the average standard during the year".

In 1919, the Report recorded "a [slow but steady increase in the Indian population](#) from year to year", and in 1922 Duncan Scott, the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, reported that "The Indian population is fairly stable at about one hundred thousand, although census statistics over a long period show a slight increase from year to year, [dispelling the popular misconception that they are dying out](#)".

Bryce blamed the Department of Indian Affairs for not doing enough to lower the death rates on reserves, but as he himself admitted in his 1906 report, the government had built hospitals on reserves, and employed a corps of [medical officers](#) who served the reserves to varying degrees:

The medical officers, numbering in all some 189, 132 being paid a salary and 57 fees, have their duties defined in the terms of their appointment, whether as giving all their time to the service, as making monthly or quarterly round visit to the reserves of an agency, with special visits in emergencies, going when called upon by

the agent, or as accompanying an inspector on his half yearly visits to the treaty Indians of the far north.

Moreover, in the residential schools, far from being blind to health conditions and the very real issue of tubercular and other infections, officials actively wrestled with the problem. In the DIA Annual Reports, school principals regularly mention the attention paid to student health, sanitation, and the ventilation of school buildings.

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One would not know any of this from recent media reports. Exactly why media attention has focussed only on deaths from disease at residential schools when the number of those deaths was dwarfed by the appalling number of deaths on the reserves, and when there is detailed information available concerning the attention paid by the federal government to health both on the reserves and in residential schools, is hard to understand.

Until 1920 attendance at residential schools was voluntary

Another vitally important aspect of the story which has been ignored by the media is that at the time most deaths from epidemics and infectious diseases occurred at residential schools, attendance was voluntary. An [1894 amendment to the Indian Act](#) purporting to introduce compulsory school attendance proved to be unworkable.

Thus, until the [Indian Act was amended in 1920](#), attendance at residential schools was not mandatory, and it was completely up to parents to decide whether to send their children or not.

If the death rate at residential schools had been significantly higher than the death rate on reserves, would parents have voluntarily sent their children to residential schools in the years prior to 1920? Obviously not. Indigenous parents are no different from any other parents. Love for their children would stop them from sending their children to a death trap. And in fact DIA Annual Reports, correspondence from residential school principals, and extant applications for admission prior to 1920 reveal that there were often more applications from parents than the residential schools could accommodate. In the 1906 DIA Annual Report, for example, the principal at the Kamloops Indian Residential School noted that "many applications had to be refused" due to lack of space.

Even after 1920, statistics show that the federal government did not uniformly enforce attendance. In 1922, for example, the census revealed that of 17,000 children between the ages of 6 and 15, 4,000 were not enrolled in a day, boarding or residential school, and as late as 1944, "at least forty per cent of Indian children of school age were not receiving any form of schooling". The perception that attendance at residential schools was uniformly enforced appears to have resulted from the fact that, as Canon R. Westgate explained in a letter to the Minister of Mines and Resources in 1938, residential schools were being used for [child welfare purposes](#):

the residential schools in existence today prove exceedingly useful as homes [1] for orphan and neglected children, [2] for children from immoral or destitute homes, [3] for children who are physically below normal and capable of being invigorated, as well as [4] for children in settlements where no day school exists

Moreover, although his research was restricted to BC, James W. Redford has shown that "[Indians played a vital role in deciding whether their children went to residential school](#)"; which children went; at what ages they enrolled; how long they stayed; and how much contact they retained with their families and culture while in attendance".

At least one child, Chief Thunderbird (Jean Baptiste Paul), actually ran away to a residential school:

"My people wanted to make a medicine man out of me," Thunderbird recalled in a 1965 interview with the Victoria Daily Colonist newspaper. "They kept putting me in cold water as part of the ritual. Finally, [I ran away from home to attend a mission school at Kuper Island](#), near Duncan. I wanted to be an athlete more than anything else."

No missing children

This brings us back to the "missing children".

Speaking at the release of the TRC Report in 2015, Commissioner Marie Wilson "asked the audience to empathize with the anguish felt by thousands of parents whose loved ones never came home":

"[Parents had their children ripped out of their arms](#), taken to a distant and unknown place never to be seen again, buried in an unmarked grave, long ago forgotten and overgrown. Think of that. Bear that. Imagine that," she said.

The [blood-red banner](#) unrolled with great fanfare by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) in 2019 embodies the same theme. It is said to contain the names of 2800 "missing children" who "were stolen from their parents, placed in these schools, and never seen again":

In fact, the banner does not appear to contain the names of any "missing children". Instead, it contains the names of children who died away from the school -- in hospital from various diseases, and elsewhere from many other causes, including house fires and accidents on their own home reserves. In a [previous essay](#) I mentioned that our research group had found BC death records for 40 of the 51 children on the NCTR list for the former Kamloops Indian Residential School. None of these children are 'missing'.

"With this kind of inflammatory rhetoric and the absurd claim that many thousands of indigenous children were exterminated and secretly disposed of by Catholic clergy, is it any wonder that church burnings and other acts of anti-Catholic hatred are becoming routine in Canada?"

Since then we have examined death records for five other BC residential schools: St. Eugene's in Cranbrook, St. Mary's in Mission, St Joseph's in Williams Lake, the Alberni Residential School, and the Ahousat Residential School on the west coast of Vancouver Island. As was the case in Kamloops, only a few deaths occurred on the premises of any of these residential schools; the deaths occurred for the most part in hospitals or on the children's home reserves. There are no "missing children" in these five schools.

The death records used in our research are available on the [BC Archives website](#) where readers can examine them at no cost.

Our research demonstrates that the NCTR lists are deeply flawed; however we are not the first to identify serious problems with them. In September 2020, [indigenous leaders were "disgusted" and "mortified"](#) to find that the NCTR list of children who had died at Shingwauk Indian Residential School in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, contained the names of four adults: Gowan Gilmour, an Anglican archdeacon; Sarah Fauquier, the wife of the Bishop of Algoma, Frederick Fauquier; and two staff members, Helena and Seymour Hayes.

How could the NCTR possibly have placed those names on a list of student deaths?

Another egregious example is found in the NCTR list for Guy Hill Indian Residential School in Manitoba on which the name of Helen Betty Osborne is found. As Canadians know, Helen Betty Osborne had left Guy Hill school, and was attending Margaret Barbour Collegiate in The Pas and boarding with a non-aboriginal family when she was [murdered in 1971](#). The fact that her name is on a list of "missing children" for Guy Hill

Residential School once again highlights the shortcomings of the NCTR lists.

If it were merely a matter of a few errors, the flawed nature of the NCTR lists could perhaps be passed over. But the TRC, and its successor, the NCTR, have publicized their Memorial Register in an emotionally explosive way for years, claiming that there are thousands of “missing children” - children forcibly taken from their parents, never to be seen again. Although on its website the NCTR uses the deceptive wording “never returned home” - giving it wiggle room to later argue that it was not implied that these thousands of children were actually “missing” - its campaign has convinced most Canadians that there are 2800, 4,000, 6,000, or [“15-25,000, and maybe more”](#) indigenous children who were taken to residential schools and never heard of again by their families.

The routine destruction of old records by past federal governments pursuant to a 1933 Treasury Board directive has complicated the task of putting names to student death records. However, even in the absence of these federal government records, our research has shown that it is possible, using provincial death records, to prove that children the NCTR claims are “missing” were never missing at all. Instead of doing the same basic research in the years since the TRC Report was released in 2015, the NCTR has stoked the flames with incendiary claims. Former TRC Commissioner Murray Sinclair has even gone so far as to state that in 1920 [“the government stopped recording deaths of children in residential schools”](#), we think, probably because the rates were so high”, which is simply untrue.

As a direct result of these hyperbolic TRC and NCTR claims, the national discussion has become so extreme that the following statement in a [major national newspaper](#) now passes for accepted fact:

Conservatively, 6,000 of our children died at the schools. They were sexually abused, starved, beaten to death, murdered by neglect or by others.

With this kind of inflammatory rhetoric and the absurd claim that many thousands of indigenous children were exterminated and secretly disposed of by Catholic clergy, is it any wonder that church burnings and other acts of anti-Catholic hatred are becoming routine in Canada? A reasonable discussion about residential schools will eventually occur. (Consider reading our book [“From Truth Comes Reconciliation”](#) of which I am one of the authors.)

In the meantime, an impartial examination of the NCTR lists is essential, which is exactly what our research group is doing - one school at a time. Why the TRC with its massive budget did not do the same years ago is a question that deserves an answer. The NCTR lists for residential schools in British Columbia we have examined to date suggest that the NCTR claim of many thousands of “missing children” is neither factual nor credible. Overwhelmingly the available evidence of the provincial death certificates and the extant federal government inquiries into student deaths show that the death of every child who died while registered at a residential school was investigated, and that each child was given a proper burial, usually on his or her home reserve. The “thousands of missing children” claim is totally false.

It is only because BC allows anyone to view digitized death certificates online free of charge 20 years after the death that we were able to do this work. Other provinces do not allow easy access to death records, and should adopt BC’s policy so as to enable academics, the media and the general public to check the NCTR lists of “missing children” in their own provinces. The NCTR should also put its records online instead of [hiding them from the public](#).

We are certain that if the media took the time to research the lists, their findings would be the same as ours - namely, that there were and are no “missing children”. This would also render unnecessary the strange spectacle of many millions of dollars’ worth of totally unnecessary ground-penetrating radar (GPR) searches across the country for “missing” children who were never missing in the first place.

And what about the bodies of those “missing children” in those unmarked graves at Kamloops?

As mentioned earlier, our national flag was lowered to half-mast on May 30th and remained at half-mast for over five months because Chief Casimir said she “knew” that there were 215 bodies buried in an apple orchard simply because her “Knowledge Keepers” told her of “oral histories” that 6 year olds were forced to dig graves in the middle of the night to bury their comrades. One of them appears to be the same “Knowledge Keeper” who claimed that she also “knows” that in the 1500s [the Pope ordered that all non-Catholic students in residential schools be put to death](#), despite the fact that there were no residential schools in Canada until three centuries later.

The only evidence that can be said to be based on science is that of the [junior academic](#) who did the GPR work at Kamloops and found 200 “soil disturbances” - which could be anything. What makes her work suspect is that she incorporated the “Knowledge Keepers’ spurious claims about 6-year-old grave diggers into her work.

The Kamloops Indian Residential School (KIRS) has had some distinguished alumni, including Len Marchand, Canada’s first indigenous federal cabinet minister. He attended KIRS by his own choice in 1949/50, and the only complaint he had about the school in his autobiography, “[Breaking Trail](#)”, was that the food was awful.

Other students became successful teachers, including Joe Stanley Michel, the first KIRS graduate, who taught at KIRS from 1953-1967. None of these distinguished alumni said anything about secret burials in apple orchards, and no parent ever claimed that their child had disappeared after entering KIRS. Chief Casimir’s bizarre May 27, 2021 announcement - when she claimed that there must have been 215 such disappearances – stands alone.

Moreover the Kamloops Band recently built its [Heritage Park](#) on these now supposedly sacred burial grounds, and has let the public wander freely for years on land the “Knowledge Keepers” now claim they always knew contained burials.

“The “thousands of missing children” claim is totally false”

The fact that the Band built a Heritage Park on the site is compelling evidence that at the time the Park was built there were no “oral histories” claiming that secret burials had taken place there. The “oral histories” are a recent invention dating from after the Park was built.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the sordid tales of secret graves and “25,000 missing children” are a collection of rumours, urban legends and conspiracy theories spurred on by the indefatigable Kevin Annett. Anyone watching his documentary “[Unrepentant](#)” or perusing his cornucopia of interviews, books, illusionary “tribunal hearings” and videos stretching back to the 1990s will quickly gain a sense of the complete nonsense which has been circulating in the Kamloops community - including among the “Knowledge Keepers” - since Annett visited there in about 2006.

It has been painful watching a compliant and incurious media asking no questions about these wildly exaggerated claims. Our media need to do their job. From the beginning we have offered our research to CBC, The National Post, and The Globe and Mail. One would think that our national media would be pleased that the “missing children” were being found. One would be wrong. Our national media has shown no interest at all.

What is also needed is an objective and impartial investigation into the NCTR. The task of compiling further lists should be given to an independent body. What is not needed is another agenda-driven multi-million-dollar inquiry conducted by ideologues.

Furthermore, it is outrageous that our government leaders are kowtowing to and accepting specious claims of “215 children buried in unmarked graves” and “15-25,000, and maybe more” missing children without investigation. It was painful to see our national flag being lowered without any evidence that the remains of 215 children had been found, and to watch Canada’s Prime Minister being [publicly scolded](#) for playing on his surfboard, when - according to the scolds - he should instead have been honouring 215 soil disturbances.

Although Justice Murray Sinclair recently opined that “[I suspect, quite frankly, that every school had a burial site](#)”, the reality is that through our research we are finding the 2800 missing children, *and we are finding that they were buried on their home reserves*. Children buried on their home reserves are not missing. These are not “missing children”.

From truth comes reconciliation.

About the Author



Brian Giesbrecht is a senior fellow with the Frontier Centre for Public Policy. He received his education at United College and The University of Manitoba, where he obtained his LLB in 1972. He worked with Walsh, Micay and Co., and then joined Legal Aid Manitoba in 1975 to become Senior Attorney and the first Area Director for western Manitoba in Brandon. Appointed to The Provincial Court (Family Division) in 1976, he heard child welfare cases and general family matters until he transferred to the Criminal Division in 1989. During his career he served on the National Family Court Committee, and various provincial court committees. He was an Associate Chief Judge from 1991 to 2005, and he became Acting Chief Judge in 1993. Among the notable cases he heard was the Lester Desjarlais Inquiry. His report strongly criticized the government’s decision to devolve child welfare responsibilities to racially based child-care agencies. Following his retirement from the Bench in 2007, Mr. Giesbrecht has written extensively for various publications. His main theme has been the need to abolish The Indian Act and the separate systems of government that exist in Canada.

The author wishes to thank his research colleagues for their invaluable assistance