

THE PROBLEM WITH DAY SCHOOLS: AN INDIAN AGENT'S VIEW FROM 1911

This is part of a report written by Thomas Deasy to the Superintendent of Indian Education in 1911. Deasy was the Indian Agent at Masset, Haida Gwaii from 1910 - 1924.

In compliance with your instructions, I have the honour to submit the following with reference to the Haida nation. It has been my good fortune to spend over half a century in British Columbia, and, during that long period, the Indian and his ways received a great deal of attention. From the Kootenay country, to the coast of Washington, I have seen the Indian in his native home. For many years after Confederation, the majority of Indians knew little of our ways, and the endeavours to uplift them. Some, even today, take little heed of the influences at work for their betterment, choosing rather to walk in the footsteps of their forefathers.

Not so the Haidas. We have men in the Haida nation who can take their places in any community. They received an education at the industrial schools fostered by the government. We have five stores on the Massett reserve all owned by members of the band. One of the Indians built a schooner, navigated it for years, carrying the mails to the islands. A number speak English fluently and are endeavouring to aid their brethren. We have town councils, elected as is done in any of the cities. All are ready and will to "advance." So much for the grown members of the two communities [Masset and Skidegate].

We now come to the children of to-day and the means of making them the Haida nation of to-morrow. Few are receiving the education that their fathers obtained. The industrial and boarding schools are too far away from the Queen Charlotte Islands. Indians, like other people, desire to keep in touch with their children. The educated Indians we have on our reserves were, in a majority of cases, raised in schools near their homes. The members of the Massett band went to Metlakatla school, which, I understand, has been closed. The Skidegates go to Coqualeetza, which is a great distance from Queen Charlotte Islands. There are no industrial or boarding

schools in this vicinity.

When I visit the Indian day schools, knowing that all the opportunity they have to grow up and meet the thousands who are pouring into our country, is the few hours teaching they receive for five days of the week, I feel that the Indian cannot take his place in the years to come. The people of these reserves go away to the fishing grounds and the canneries during the summer months. Their schools are then closed and what they learn during the few short months of the winter is not sufficient to place them on an equality with their white brethren in an educational way.

When a white child goes to his home, the father and mother talk to him in the language that he will use through his life. His surroundings are the best. Everything tends to advance the white boy. Not so the Indian. Four hours at school – twenty hours with his parents – talking the Haida language and continuing in the ways of the Indian. Five months at the day school, seven months wandering round with the parents, in the canneries and towns, learning nothing that is useful, and seeing a great deal that the young should avoid.

We must give the clergy of these reserves great credit for the manner in which they have Christianized the Indians. In the few years the missionaries have been with the Indians the results are astonishing. From heathendom to what the Indians are today has been more rapid than with any other people. It is the same wherever I have been throughout the province. The missionaries are eager to teach the gospel to the Indian; the native is willing to learn.

The day school, as we have it on our reserves, will never place the coming generation on the same level with those who received their education in the industrial and boarding schools. It is "results" we are all

looking for. The effect of education upon reserve life has been the advancement of our Indians almost beyond comprehension. The middle-aged Indians, who were pupils in the industrial schools, are foremost in all good work on the reserves.

It would add most materially in this province, where the reserves are the best portions of land for agricultural purposes, if some means could be devised to educate the young in farming and gardening. In visiting the schools, one finds that a number will read and write very well; but how many of them understand the meaning of the words they use? What the Indian requires is a good, practical education. The farm and garden, carpenter work, boat-building – in fact any outside occupation – would be better for the children than simply to try to teach them to master the English language.

It is proverbial of the Indian that he will not chastise the young. The children rule in the home, and there is little or no restraint. In the school-houses the teacher must be careful how they punish. On our reserves the Indians live in small colonies and are related, one to the other. Seldom will one of a tribe marry a member of another tribe. An offence to one family means that a number will resent. There is no great incentive for the young to learn our language. They receive no prizes and the school-house is not what the Indian children have been accustomed to.

In this agency, it must be remembered, the Indians have been far removed from the whites. The missionaries and teachers controlled them until they went to the fishing grounds and canneries. Now, with the settlement of the islands, there is a danger which faces young and old. Just so long as the Indian can be kept under certain restraint and associates little with the whites, Japanese and Chinese, there is hope for him. If we can keep them on their reserves, in their homes, they will not be in the way of temptation.

All the young need is an incentive and encouragement – the paternal care of the white and to be taken from the environment that goes so far to keep them backward in the march of civilization. The Indian day school will not accomplish this object. In a country like ours, where “the fittest survive,” the Indian must be able to compete with the thousands now flocking to our shores. The Indians of the Queen Charlotte Islands realize that they are receiving special attention from the Department of Indian Affairs, and they are grateful; but our work is only beginning and their increasing numbers indicate that we have a task that will show results in the future well-being of a people who, in the years of their forefathers, were the guardians of the country which one of our leading statesmen recently described as “the sentinel islands between Asia and America.”

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Background: This document is an excerpt from a report sent by Indian Agent Thomas Deasy of the Queen Charlotte Agency to his superiors in the Department of Indian Affairs. It was published in the Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs, in the 1912 Sessional Papers for the year ending March 1911. It was probably written in 1911 shortly after Deasy was appointed as Indian Agent in the newly formed Queen Charlotte Agency, with headquarters at Masset, Haida Gwaii.

Thomas Deasy (1857-1936), born in Portsmouth England, came to the colony of British Columbia with his father, who was one of the Royal Engineers who were stationed at New Westminster. His family later moved to Victoria where he worked as a printer and fire chief. He took the position of Indian Agent at the age of 53, from 1910 to 1924. He had a forceful personality and strong Christian principles. He was known to consult frequently with Chiefs and Elders, but maintained his role of protecting and correcting the First Nations people in his agency. He wrote “The Indians must have a guiding hand with them. The duties of an Indian agent shows that they cannot progress unless under the strictest of discipline.”