

## Early Warnings: Elizabeth Shaw’s Letter, 1898

I have had it on my mind to give you an idea of what I saw at the Port Simpson Home, because believing that you as the Secretary of our Montreal Women’s Missionary Society should know the condition of affairs as I found them.

I have delayed writing from week to week as the task is anything but a pleasant one. I know you will understand how distasteful it is to me under the circumstances, but I feel impressed that I should not be dealing honestly with my church or by the Missionary Society if I did not apprise the proper authorities of what is going on in the Institution of which I was Matron for five weeks.

Good schools are an absolute necessity and under the Indian Act attendance upon schools is compulsory in B.C. What these Indians need as far as I can make out is something that will enter into their everyday life and purify that. I suppose the originators of the Home system thought that the sending of well-trained sons and daughters back into their Indian homes was the best method of accomplishing this, but I think that no candid worker in this field will go so far as to say this result has followed.

After 5 weeks of matronship I could understand why. In this Home there were 21 boys ranging in age from 6 to 20. From the oldest to the youngest every one of these lads had his thinking done for him. The minutest detail of every boy’s life was supervised by somebody, and his thinking faculties were fairly superintended out of him. At least that is my opinion.

What do you think of locking dormitory doors upon boys most of whom are on the verge of young manhood; this is the unwavering rule at the Home, and if during the night one of them wanted to go out, he had to knock on the wall, and, if he succeeded in waking the Matron she had to get up and let him out, await his return and relock him in again. If he did not succeed in awaking her ... but I need not explain further. And this is the routine of the day. From the overseeing of their private devotions in the morning to the

putting of them to bed at night they are constantly being watched. For 13 years in the East I taught children of all grades and sizes and I know that this kind of treatment would have simply paralyzed their faculties. Are the Indians made of different materials?

I often looked at those 21 boys in the Port Simpson Home and wondered if a method which made a machine of human beings formed in the image of God could be the right one. What do you think?

Before I came into this work I, in common with most of the other women of the Women’s Missionary Society, supposed that the one great aim of these Homes was to bring these Indian children to God and through these children to reach the older people. You may imagine my feelings when on questioning the boys I found that only 3 out of 21 had any desire to become Christians. You may know how my heart was wrung when I found that most of them fairly hated the name of religion. This was particularly the case with the older ones. In fact they all seemed to detest everything in connection with the Home and really when I think of some of the scenes that I witnessed there I can hardly wonder at their feeling.

The slightest mistake on the part of the boys brought down the wrath of the authorities, and the severe floggings which were the almost inevitable consequences of wrong-doing seemed to me in many cases to be out of all proportion to the gravity of the offence. I know that children need to be corrected and Indian children are probably no exception to this rule, but to keep them in a chronic state of fear, as these children apparently were, seems to me to be wrong and unnatural.

I can truthfully say that I never was any place where I saw so little manifestation of love and sympathy as in that Mission Home at Port Simpson. “Never trust an Indian” was a quotation I heard very frequently and truly it seemed the rule in that Institution. None of the boys were trusted and right well they knew this lack of faith in them. One of the big boys put the matter in a nut shell

when he said, “We never receive anything here but a threat or a command.”

These children never seem happy; they did not play as other boys so far as I could see and there was considerable skin disease among them which was in my opinion partly due to insufficient diet. I would not like to state that such a thing was of a regular occurrence but I can positively say that again and again during my matronship I was compelled to set meat before the boys that my brothers would not set before their dogs. It was so nearly rotten that the smell of it when cooking was so bad that I really could not stay in the kitchen, and the boys, hungry as I am sure they were, said that they could not eat it, this, when there was abundance of good wholesome food in the house, seemed to me inexcusable. In fact there was abundance of everything thanks to the generosity of the badly mistaken people of the East. And if you could have seen the piles and piles of warm comfortable clothing locked away in the store-room and then took a look at the thin patched, yes and ragged clothes of the few boys that were not supplied with comfortable clothes by their family friends. When I asked why I could not make over some of those good clothes for the 2 or 3 orphans who needed clothes so badly, I was told that these were to be exchanged for fish.

I very much fear that the Girls’ Home is conducted on pretty much the same principle. Of course I never lived there and consequently did not see behind the curtains of the Institution as I did in the Boy’s Home. One incident did come to my personal notice. There was a girl in the Home that caused a great deal of trouble. It happened that her Father wished to take her away from the Home before she had stayed there the requisite length of time and eventually the case went to law. My cousin, Mr. Harris of Vancouver, pleaded the suit which was decided in favour of the Home. The girl was taken back to the home and shortly became very troublesome to the new Matron who finally handed her over to the Principal of the Boys Home to see what he could do with her. Nellie was taken to the Boys Home to act as general servant for the family, and he told me himself

that she seemed delighted at the prospect of the change saying “Take me anywhere only take me out of this.”

Nellie went down to the village one night without permission. She was found and taken directly back to the Richards establishment and some time after midnight I was awakened by awful screams from downstairs. As soon as I had recovered from my fright I awoke to the fact that Nellie Tennis, a full grown young woman, engaged to be married, was receiving a severe thrashing at the hands of the man who has the spiritual and temporal over-sight of the Boy’s Home.

My blood nearly froze in my veins as the shrieks of the unfortunate woman rang through the house, and to my dying day I shall never forget the agony in her voice as she pleaded “Oh Mr. Richards, pray for me.” Nor the tone of his as he replied between the blows “Pray for you? I am tired praying for you.” After the bearing was over the culprit was thrust into the Skookum House, a little stuffy pantry off the kitchen without air or light. Just here I might explain that I understand that there are prison houses in connection with all the Homes under the auspices of the Methodist Church, though of course I only saw those in the Homes at Port Simpson, but if these are fair samples, they are a disgrace to our fair Methodism, at least so it seemed to me. They are regular jail cells without modern jail improvements. But to return to poor Nellie, who was locked up in one of those places (I forget how many days) she lay on the floor with no better bed than an old mat and a blanket.

You will probably wonder that the children in these Homes stay there when the majority of them seem so unhappy. I wondered at it myself until I discovered that the parents of guardians of the children bind them over to the Home authorities for a term of years and are powerless to get them out until the expiration of the contract, unless special permission is granted by the Home authorities. The parents are thus powerless in the matter and if the children attempted to run away there is no place for them to go even if they succeeded in getting out of the Home.

Source: United Church Archives

## The Road to Reconciliation

Since the end of World War Two, significant changes have occurred which made people aware of the need for reconciliation between First Nations and other Canadians. Some are listed below.

Find out and record why each of these events was significant to the Reconciliation Journey.

- 1945 End of World War Two
- 1949 BC First Nations get the provincial vote
- 1951 Indian Act amendments
- 1960 All First Nations given the vote in Canada without having to give up status
- 1969 The federal government takes over operations of residential schools from the churches
- 1972 *Indian Control of Indian Education* published
- 1982 The Constitution Act affirms rights of Aboriginal Peoples
- 1986 United Church apologizes for imposing western civilization on First Nations people
- 1988 Publication of *Resistance and Renewal, Surviving the Indian Residential School*
- 1990 Oka Crisis, Quebec
- 1994 Publication of *Breaking the Silence*
- 1991-1998 Churches apologize for involvement in Residential Schools
- 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal People Final Report
- 1996 National Aboriginal Day first declared
- 1999 Nisga'a Treaty signed
- 2006 Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement
- 2008 Government of Canada apologizes to former residential school students
- 2008 Truth and Reconciliation Commission created
- 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Final Report

## The Road to Reconciliation

Since the end of World War Two, significant changes have occurred which made people aware of the need for reconciliation between First Nations and other Canadians. Some are listed below.

### 1945 End of World War Two

The atrocities that were committed during World War Two forced a change in social consciousness and brought about many social and political changes around the world. Canada joined with other countries to sign The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Many people in Canada saw the disconnect between the service of Indigenous war veterans, who had stood alongside other Canadian soldiers on the battlefields, and their treatment when they returned home, particularly the fact that they could not vote in elections. The time was ripe for changes to the Indian Act and in 1946 a Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons began to consider major revisions to the Indian Act.

### 1949 BC First Nations get the provincial vote

In 1948, the parliamentary committee recommended that Indigenous people receive the vote, but it came with conditions contrary to the issues of Indigenous Rights and Title. However, in 1949 British Columbia became the first province to give First Nations the vote without conditions, and without losing status. For other First Nations across Canada, the time it took to win the right to vote provincially varied considerably. The date for achieving the vote in the provinces (except for Nova Scotia and Newfoundland) were: Manitoba – 1952, Ontario – 1954, Saskatchewan – 1960, P.E.I. – 1963, New Brunswick – 1963, Alberta – 1965 and Quebec – 1969.

### 1951 Indian Act amendments

In the wake of the post-war social conscience and the signing of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Canada was forced to modernize the Indian Act. Generally, many of the oppressive clauses were removed. For example the definition of “person” as someone who was not an Indian was removed. The Anti-Potlatch laws were also taken out. University graduates were no longer automatically enfranchised. Bands now had more autonomy in managing the affairs of their reserves, although the Minister still had powers to intervene. Concerning education, the Act allowed the government to enter into agreements with provincial school systems for the education of First Nations children. The term “residential schools” replaced “industrial and boarding schools.”

### 1960 All First Nations given the vote in Canada without having to give up status

Under Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, all “status Indians” were given full citizenship with the unconditional right to vote federally as of July 1, 1960. They were no longer required to give up their treaty rights and lose their status.

### 1969 The federal government takes over operations of residential schools from the churches

In the 1950s and 1960s, the government shifted its policies towards integration of First Nations students into the public school system. However, the churches continued to operate the residential schools which in many cases were used as dormitories for high school students who attended local high schools. The federal government began hiring teachers directly in 1954, but the schools were still run by the churches until 1969, when the federal government took over all operations and gradually began to close the residential schools.

1972 *Indian Control of Indian Education* published

The first comprehensive policy paper on education for Aboriginal people was published by the National Indian Brotherhood. *Indian Control of Indian Education* was presented to the Minister of Indian Affairs on December 21, 1972. The policy advocated local control, parental responsibility, culturally based curriculum, and the importance of adult education. The government initially responded positively to the paper but in practice, the interpretation and implementation by the Department of Indian Affairs resulted in limited changes being made.

1982 The Constitution Act affirms rights of Aboriginal Peoples

By this act the Canadian Constitution became an act of Canadian rather than British parliament. It contains the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, as well as Section 35 which recognizes and protects Aboriginal and treaty rights. It also defines “Aboriginal Peoples of Canada” to be Indian, Inuit and Métis.

1986 United Church apologizes for imposing western civilization on First Nations people

The apology by the head of the United Church was the first public acknowledgment by a church that its policies had been misguided and damaging, saying “We imposed our civilization as a condition for accepting the gospel.” It did not directly refer to Indian Residential Schools.

1988 Publication of *Resistance and Renewal, Surviving the Indian Residential School*

This is one of the first books to bring the abuses of Indian Residential Schools into the open. It is based on interviews with thirteen survivors of the Kamloops Indian Residential School.

1990 Oka Crisis, Quebec

The Oka Crisis was a 78-day standoff between Mohawk protestors, Quebec Police, RCMP and the Canadian Army. The dispute arose over proposed development on land that included a Mohawk burial ground. The escalating levels of armed response by government shocked many Canadians and brought public attention to many unresolved Aboriginal issues. It was a key factor that led to the creation of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People in 1991.

1994 Publication of *Breaking the Silence*

The Assembly of First Nations published *Breaking the Silence: An interpretive study of residential school impact and healing as illustrated by the stories of First Nation individuals*. This was one of the first examination of the effects of the Residential Schools on First Nations people, and was based on the stories of survivors.

1991-1998 Churches apologize for involvement in Residential Schools

During the 1990s the Roman Catholic, United, Presbyterian and Anglican issued apologies for their roles in the Indian Residential School system. This was a broad public recognition that residential school system was inherently wrong and damaging.

1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal People Final Report

Established in 1991, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People held hearings throughout Canada to gather testimony in relation to its major in-depth examination of the relationship between Aboriginal People and the rest of Canada. The final report, containing 4000 pages in 5 volumes, contains detailed analysis of the history of the relationship, and makes 440 recommendations for changes to Aboriginal Affairs.

#### 1996 National Aboriginal Day first declared

One of the recommendations of the Royal Commission that was acted upon was the creation of a National Aboriginal Day to bring positive awareness of Aboriginal culture and successes. It is held every year on June 21, on or near the summer solstice.

#### 1999 Nisga'a Treaty signed

This was the first modern day treaty to be signed in British Columbia, indicating a changing relationship between First Nations and other BC citizens.

#### 2006 Indian Residential School Agreement

In the 1990s Indian Residential School survivors began to take legal action to get compensation for physical and sexual abuse they had suffered. By 1998 there were more than a thousand claims against the federal government. The number of claims continued to grow, and in 2002 a National Class Action was filed for compensation for all former Indian Residential school students in Canada, as well as their family members. As a result of further judgements by the Supreme Court going against Canada, and the overwhelming number of lawsuits seeking compensation, Canada and nearly 80,000 survivors reached an agreement, called the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement, in 2005. It was ratified in 2006 and implemented in 2007. Out of this agreement came the commitment not only for individual compensation, but for the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and moneys dedicated to a healing process.

#### 2008 Government of Canada apologizes to former residential school students

Arising out of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement was the desire by Aboriginal leaders and the courts for an apology by the Canadian government. The Prime Minister's statement on July 11, 2008 in the House of Commons by the Prime Minister put on record in the Canadian Parliament the governments' acknowledgement of the injustices of the Indian Residential School System.

#### 2008 Truth and Reconciliation Commission created

Part of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement called for the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to uncover the full truth and history of the Residential School system, and moved towards a reconciliation between all Canadians. Through the Commission, the possibility of a true reconciliation and a new relationship was born.

#### 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report

The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission came to an end in June 2015, with the delivery of its Final Report. It included 94 recommendations in a document called *Calls to Action* which were intended to redress the legacy of Indian Residential Schools and advance the process of Reconciliation. The National Research Centre on Indian Residential Schools was established at the University of Winnipeg to house the statements, documents and other materials gathered by the Commission. They will be available to any interested person to view.



# The Road to Reconciliation Timeline

