

# **Colonization and Domestic Service**

Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

**Edited by Victoria K. Haskins  
and Claire Lowrie**

## 11 'I Would Like the Girls at Home'

### Domestic Labor and the Age of Discharge at Canadian Indian Residential Schools

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Survivors of Canadian Indian residential schools and their descendants will often recall discharge from the schools occurring at the age of either sixteen or eighteen. While the difference between the ages of sixteen and eighteen is small, for young adults these years are part of a critical stage of life, and so it is worthwhile thinking through this common recollection. In fact the discharge of students from residential schools at the ages of sixteen or eighteen was a significant point of contention both for parents and other relatives of students as well as for school officials. This chapter examines the struggle over age of discharge between 1920 and 1940 through the lens of correspondence between parents and other family members, the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) and school staff about the return of female pupils. Parents and other relatives of the students initiated the exchange, requesting that pupils nearing or past the age of sixteen be returned to them because they were needed at home. In response, school staff wanting to retain students to the age of eighteen and beyond insisted that female students needed the further domestic training, moral uplift and protection offered by the schools so that they could be 'fitted' to undertake employment as domestic servants upon discharge. In fact it was often the need of the schools for the domestic labor of female students that was the real concern. On both sides of the issue, gender mattered and the struggle illuminates the importance of young Indigenous women to both economies of colonization and to Indigenous communities.

The residential school system operated between 1879 and 1986 and was a joint initiative of the federal DIA and Catholic and Protestant churches. The system was established as part of the federal responsibility for First Nations education outlined in the British North America Act at Confederation in 1867. Formal education was also an element negotiated into many of the treaties signed between First Nations people and the Crown in the years 1870–1877. The expectation was that education, maintained by the federal government but implemented and controlled by First Nations, would benefit First Nations communities in the future. However, the federal government interpreted its responsibilities in the area of education as helping to facilitate the 'civilization,' Christianization and assimilation of Indigenous

people, rather than acknowledging education as a treaty right (Carr-Stewart 2001: 125–43). Residential schools, with their capacity to board children, were favored because they disrupted the influence of Indigenous parents and communities on children and encompassed students in a ‘circle of civilization’ (Milloy 1999: 33) or a totalizing environment of learning established by the church and the state. Accordingly, in addition to boarding facilities and classrooms, many of the schools had farms and a number of other facilities to teach industrial and vocational education including large kitchens, laundries and gardens.

In 1931, at the height of the Indian residential school system in Canada, there were approximately eighty schools in operation; forty-four were run by Roman Catholics, twenty-one were run by Anglicans, thirteen were run by the United Church of Canada and two were Presbyterian schools (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996: 331–332). It is difficult to place an exact figure on the number of schools, but the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has identified 139 for its purposes, recognizing that this does not represent the total number of schools that operated in Canada. There were more than 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis children who attended the schools in every province and territory except Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. The earliest schools were opened in the east, but more than half of the schools were located in western Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2013; Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada 2013). Chronically underfunded, these schools provided inadequate education. Worse, histories of the schools by ex-pupils and others have shown that at the schools, children faced widespread cultural, physical and sexual violence, deprivation of food, and exposure to unhealthy conditions that fostered diseases like tuberculosis and the Spanish flu, malnutrition and accidental deaths and injuries.

There is a rich historiography of the residential school system that explores the profound connection between colonialism and Indian educational policies and traces the more personal, familial and community-based impacts of the history of residential schooling (see Regan 2011; Furniss 2011; Racette 2009; Milloy 1999; Fournier 1998; Kelm 1999; Miller 1997; Dyck 1997; Graham 1997; Grant 1996; Knockwood 1992; Haig-Brown 1988). Within this literature, an emphasis on education as a tool of colonization, especially cultural assimilation, has tended to overshadow the central place of gendered labor within the institutions and, ultimately, the vital role that the appropriation and regulation of Indigenous labor plays in colonial dispossession. From the 1880s until well after 1951, manual labor and academic study shared equal space in the curriculum of residential schools, also known as the half-day system. A strict division of labor by gender at the schools reflected broader ideologies in Canadian society in which one’s work and workplace were supposedly inherited according to gender. Thus, at the schools, female education included housework, sewing and mending, food preparation, washing and ironing. For female students, manual labor

was supposed to prepare them to have a 'civilizing' influence on their homes and communities when they became wives and mothers. The acceptance of females at residential schools was in fact originally defended on this premise. Moreover, domestic training was thought to prepare First Nations women to enter the labor market and the broader socioeconomic order as domestic servants (Barman 1995: 343).<sup>1</sup> The third justification for the half-day system was that residential schools were fully dependent upon the manual labor of students (Milloy 1999: 169)—especially older ones. It was also for these reasons that school officials argued for the extension of schooling until students had been placed in domestic service or were married.

Prolonged training, even against the will of students and their families, had profound impacts on Indigenous families and communities. While the historiography of Indian residential schools in Canada is rich, analysis of Indigenous domestic labor and colonization is thin. This reflects a tendency on the part of Canadian historians to write First Nations labor out of Canadian history; moreover, the little scholarship on labor tends to focus on men's work (McCallum 2013). Furthermore, literature on domestic labor history in Canada also tends to bypass Indigenous women's widespread engagement in domestic labor (see for example Kinnear 1998: 110). Yet as I argue elsewhere, domestic training was a fundamental element of Indian education and there was a significant demand for the domestic labor of Indigenous women throughout Canada (McCallum 2013). Sources on this history are few and far between. One important source is correspondence between Indian Affairs officials and parents and guardians of students about the discharge of students and the appropriate 'place' of female students aged sixteen to eighteen.

## CORRESPONDENCE

It was practically impossible for First Nations to have any input into colonial Indian policy, which was controlled by the Canadian government largely through the DIA. However the practice of colonial law was highly local, and, it appears, often negotiated and clarified in correspondence between DIA officials located in Ottawa, local Indian agents and school staff, and, sometimes, First Nations people themselves. Throughout the years under study, requests by parents and other relatives for the return of students from residential schools were common and persistent. Indian Commissioner for the prairie provinces William Morris Graham stated in 1926 that 'we have at least 100 applications a year here from Indians, to have children dismissed from school before they are 18 years of age.'<sup>2</sup> In 1929, an Alberta Indian agent explained that 'the parents ask that [the girls] leave at the age of 16 and in most cases they are persistent during the next two years in this request.'<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, letters by Indigenous people to the Department of Indian Affairs constitute a small element within the archive of DIA

correspondence; DIA records mostly consist of conversations about Indigenous people among non-Indigenous people. Thus these letters are very special, particularly to those who read archival records for Indigenous voices. Letters constitute an important part of our written record—which is often presumed to be non-existent and, when acknowledged, is often wrongly presumed to be thoroughly colonized and thus inherently unhelpful to Indigenous research (Russell 2005).

While biography, autobiography and Indigenous literature bring Indigenous writing into focus, everyday formalized compositions such as letters to the DIA are often overlooked as sources of information about the past perhaps because they are so difficult to locate. Once they are located, however, at least within the DIA records, these letters stand out physically: while the vast majority of the files are type-written on standard government or school letterhead, First Nations letters are handwritten on different types of paper, ranging from floral stationery to blank and lined paper of various sizes. Likewise, they stand out in terms of content. Unlike daily correspondence of federal bureaucrats, which tends to be prescriptive, directive and administrative, First Nations letters are more descriptive of the day-to-day lives of Indigenous people, and are thus much more private and personal than what is written by employees of the DIA. These letters can, therefore, ultimately change our perspective on the past. They challenge a traditional view of government policy and Indigenous history that tends to assume that Indigenous people were illiterate and largely unexpressive, and that the objectives of Indian policy were synonymous with the results of the legislation, and caused Indigenous people to, as I read so often in undergraduate essays, ‘lose their identity.’ Cultural and historical loss was part of the violence of the residential school system—but so too were everyday forms of Indigenous expression and resistance, including letter writing.

In the context of age of discharge disputes, First Nations people wrote to the Department of Indian Affairs for one reason—they wanted those who were in charge to re-evaluate a decision that was negatively impacting their lives. In letters requesting the return of young women, parents and others outlined particular struggles in the context of their arguments for the need of the students’ help at home. This reflects the importance of Indigenous women to Indigenous communities socially, culturally, economically and politically (Anderson 2011). It also reflects a specific historical context in which destitute and dislocated households were commonplace; and within which the absence of young women in the home constituted a substantial burden to Indigenous families. One example was the case of Mrs. D., who had pneumonia in the spring of 1937. She wanted her sister, Eva, who was seventeen years old, discharged from school so that she could ‘care for her two children and housework while she rests.’<sup>24</sup> The reference to Eva’s age of seventeen was likely meant to substantiate Mrs. D’s request by connecting it to the legal complex that regulated First Nations people—the Indian Act.

The Indian Act (still active today) is a consolidation of pre-Confederation Indian legislation into a nationwide framework and is part of a legal complex that equips the Canadian federal government to operate as a colonial power. The first official Indian Act, *An Act to Amend and Consolidate the Laws Respecting Indians*, became part of the Statutes of Canada in 1876. The Act defines who is and who is not a 'Status Indian' (or an individual who is recorded as an Indian in the Indian Registrar, and thus is eligible for treaty rights, participation in band government and access to Indian land and resources); what is a 'Reserve' (or a tract of land vested in the Crown and set apart for the use of Indians); and a wide-ranging set of regulations, disabilities and penalties that applied to 'Status Indians' and to 'Reserves.'

In terms of education, the Indian Act included clauses about the establishment, operation, management and maintenance of Indian schools, the transportation of children to and from school, the per capita grant system, compulsory school attendance, and penalties for noncompliance. It also outlined age of discharge rules. The 1886 Indian Act described a two-part school attendance law pertaining to age. The first part was that the Governor-in-Council could make regulations to have Indian agents or others commit 'children of Indian blood under the age of sixteen years' to industrial or boarding schools. The second part was that children were to be 'kept, cared for and educated for a period not extending beyond the time at which such children shall reach the age of eighteen years.'<sup>5</sup> Children could be sent to the school until they were sixteen, but kept there until they were eighteen. For a brief period from 1920 to 1930, compulsory attendance only applied to 'every Indian child between the ages of seven and fifteen years.' Moreover, the statement about keeping students until they were eighteen was removed.<sup>6</sup> This change caused backlash from principals and school staff across the country who were frustrated that the age limit had been shortened. In spite of the clear language in the law, staff continued the practice of compelling students over fifteen to attend, although they were uncertain of the limits of their powers to do so and often sought DIA approval and support.

In 1930 the law changed again. The age of discharge was brought back to sixteen and the clause about detaining students until they were eighteen was also reinstated. Now section 10(1) of the Indian Act read:

Every Indian child between the full ages of seven and sixteen years who is physically able shall attend such day, industrial or boarding school as may be designated by the Superintendent General for the full periods during which such school is open each year; provided that where it has been made to appear to the satisfaction of the Superintendent General that it would be detrimental to any particular Indian child to have it discharged from school on attaining the full age of sixteen years, the Superintendent General may direct that such child be detained at school for such further period as may seem to be advisable, but not beyond the



full age of eighteen years, and in such case the provisions of this section with respect to truancy shall apply to such child and its parents, guardians or persons with whom such child resides during such further period of school attendance.<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. D's request for her sister's help during her illness was thus subject to the law. But the law on the matter of seventeen-year-olds was unclear and ultimately the decision was in the hands of the government. A clause added to the Indian Act in 1920 had allowed for exceptions to compulsory schooling in the event that a child was sick, had passed the entrance exam for high school, or was needed to assist in 'husbandry or urgent and necessary household duties.'<sup>8</sup> This clause reflected compulsory schooling legislation for non-Aboriginal people in Canada. With regard to First Nations children, the application of the exception was subject to the approval of the Department of Indian Affairs, an added layer of control and coercion that did not apply to non-Aboriginal students. In Eva's case, however, the principal did not want to discharge her, preferring that she continue her studies at the school. He felt that over the summer Eva could take a domestic science course that would prepare her for 'suitable employment in a private home.'<sup>9</sup> In such cases, principals commonly prevailed upon parents and guardians that further training was in the best interests of the students. Department of Indian Affairs Superintendent of Education Russell T. Ferrier explained to Indian agent G.A. Stevenson of Selkirk, Manitoba:

You will realize that the majority of residential school pupils will considerably benefit by remaining in such schools until they are eighteen years of age or even older—this is especially true of the girls for reasons which will readily suggest themselves to you. For these reasons, the Department expects Indian Agents, Principals and others interested in Indian education to make every possible endeavour to persuade parents to leave their children in residential schools for a longer period than that prescribed by the Act.<sup>10</sup>

In the end, it was decided that Eva could have a one-month leave only, and that her training and future placement as a domestic were more important than the immediate needs of her family.

This case clearly outlines how residential schools readily displaced the labor of young adults from their families to other people's homes and the schools themselves. The taken-for-granted way that officials refused parents and other family members who needed their labor at home suggests a deeper, ingrained pattern of hostility towards any efforts by Indigenous families and communities to be self-supporting and economically viable. In a colonizing context, young Indigenous women are in fact only considered 'useful' when their labor is harnessed to non-Indigenous projects. This pattern had the effect of creating a deficit for Indigenous families and communities that

is consistent with the arguments made by Indigenous political thinkers in the 1970s and 1980s (see Cardinal 1969; Manitoba Indian Brotherhood 1971; Kirkness 1978; Goodwill 1989). At this time, critics outlined how racist and colonial governance and land policies created a separate and unequal economic system for Indigenous people. Usually segregated from economic centers and unable to raise capital except through the Department of Indian Affairs, Indigenous people living on reserves fared much worse economically compared to the rest of Canada. In terms of capital and labor opportunities, this served to drain reserves of Indigenous money and human resources. While this argument initially tended to center on men, men's work and men's income, literature on Indian control of Indian education, health and employment has challenged us to think more broadly about who and what was affected by this disparity.

The refusal to allow for Eva's discharge was indicative of practices at residential schools that stood apart from non-Indian schools in Canada. For example, it was not until 1970 when all provinces across the country had a minimum age of discharge from as old as fifteen or sixteen (Oreopoulos 2006). Moreover, public school laws did not contain options to refuse the release of students who were over the age limit of attendance. One explanation for this difference was the Department's and Churches' missionary zeal, which encouraged the extension of education, seen as a key tool in assimilation, for longer periods of time. But the Department also had very specific and gendered justifications for retaining students that were essential to the broader project of colonization.

The rationale for decisions by the department was that the education of young Indigenous women was to fit them for domestic service to non-Indigenous people and thus young Indigenous women required training at residential schools until the point at which they were fully employed. This was a closed, circular and self-serving rationale and First Nations challenged this vision with some difficulty. By the time a letter of objection was written to the Department, a number of steps had already been taken to retrieve children from an institution. The process would have usually begun with a request to the principal—it was when this resulted in refusal (or no response), that parents or guardians contacted the Department directly. The Department would then follow up with the principal or other school or Department staff before responding to the parent or guardian. If school staff wanted to refuse the request, they would then make a case against the parents to the Department and ask for their advice. There was a great effort to follow chain of command at the Department, which had the obvious effect of bypassing First Nations people. This makes their letters to the Department all the more valuable and important, as they are the result of much effort and frustration in having their voices and arguments heard. Moreover, letters written by mothers or other female relatives are represented among the most marginalized voices. While Indigenous women engaged in a range of informal political, social and cultural structures, they had no options to



engage in formal political structures as they were excluded from voting or running in band, municipal, provincial and federal elections. Nonetheless, their letters directly confront school staff and challenge the DIA's entitlement to make decisions on behalf of their children.

In 1937, Mrs. W. anxiously wrote directly to the DIA concerning her daughters Gladys and Velma, who were sixteen and fourteen years old. She wrote, 'I am in bad health and I cannot do work at home. My husband is dead and [I] have no one to help me besides. I have to go out and work and I would like the girls at home [so they can] help me.' She continued, 'They are not at present going to school . . . so they may as well be helping me at home. . . . The older girl is dissatisfied in school and it would be best for them to come home.'<sup>11</sup> She then adds, 'They can go to school here as we have a new teacher at our school.' When the Indian Department contacted the principal of the school, he responded that it was:

simply a matter of the mother thinking that they are old enough to do some work and they could therefore perhaps be of use at home. While they were younger she was quite satisfied to have us look after them and now they are old enough to make a contribution to the life of the school she would like to have them at home . . . I beg to point out that it is imperative that we should have a percentage of pupils old enough to carry on the work of the school without any one of them being at all burdened. These two girls are not yet fitted to go out to work and would only become a liability upon the reservation without anything to really occupy their time.<sup>12</sup>

It seems entirely reasonable for parents to send children to school until the point at which they would be useful at home. Moreover, with the option of day schooling available to Gladys and Velma, the Department's argument about the importance of education is doubtful. Rather, the principal simply refused to return Gladys and Velma for two oft-repeated reasons: first because older students' domestic labor was needed at the school and second, because students should not leave the schools until they had obtained employment.

The maintenance and operation of Indian residential schools hinged on student labor. The principal of the Port Alberni Indian Residential School in British Columbia complained bitterly about the lowering of the age of discharge, and thus the ability of parents to withdraw students from the schools 'from the point of business management.' He wrote:

The whole school plant has been constructed on the understanding that they remain till 18. I find myself with a farm and stock . . . a large steam heating plant . . . a large laundry plant, a large baking outfit, a cooking outfit for 120 people, a sewing and dressmaking Department to do sewing for the 100 children. To help with this work we have 5 boys and

girls who are over 14 years of age and . . . some of these are looking for jobs in the canneries.<sup>13</sup>

The dependence of the schools on female domestic labor was both an effect of a colonial vision that aimed to reform Indian girls and women, and a mechanism of colonization—or a tactic by which further dispossession and subjugation could be implemented. Subjugation required the displacement of women's labor and at the same time, colonizing operations required the labor of women.

There is some evidence to suggest that the burden of maintaining operational schools fell disproportionately on the shoulders of female students. Schools were funded by the Department on a per capita grant system and thus school principals were required to justify the presence of pupils over the age limits and did so in annual reports each year to headquarters. The 1936 report on students sixteen or older from the Brandon Indian Residential School in Manitoba illuminates some gender disparity in discharge practices. Of the total of sixty students at that school who were sixteen years of age or older, over half were female (approximately 57 percent) and almost three quarters (73 percent) were recommended to stay. Twenty-six of the thirty-four female students, or 76 percent, were recommended to continue; eighteen of the twenty-six boys were recommended to continue, just slightly below 70 percent. There were some similarities in justifications for retaining both female and male students, such as an interest in continued schooling, access to medical care, and because they were 'good workers.' But there were also some gendered rationales. For example, the principal was more likely to comment on male students needing to continue because they were 'slow in development' mentally, physically or both. In contrast, it was only female students whose continuance was justified by the rationale that they 'needed protection and guidance.'<sup>14</sup> Significantly, in two cases that year, female siblings who were recommended for continuance because it was impossible to secure employment for them near their school were ultimately discharged once the Department was informed that 'suitable homes' were waiting for them.<sup>15</sup> This indicates that while age was a legal category guiding discharge law, in practice discharge was related to a number of other factors including the point at which students began working for wages.

Students and graduates engaged in a continuum of different kinds of work that included unpaid and paid labor. Many female students worked at the schools and in the private homes of many of the missionaries, principals, teachers and other Department and school staff. This kind of work is described by Jane Willis (1973: 177–81) who worked as a domestic for the wife of the principal of St. Philip's Anglican Residential School in Fort George, Quebec. This work involved childcare, including feeding, washing and dressing children and taking them out for a walk, putting them down for naps and sending them out to play as well as housework, including dusting, sweeping, mopping, laundering, ironing, polishing silver, washing

windows and washing dishes. Hospitals, nursing stations and mission stations also depended on the domestic labor of Indigenous women, work that was almost always part-time and poorly paid, and arranged by school principals and teachers. In some cases, employment placement was actually an expectation after attending a residential school. For example, Elders at Sandy Bay, Manitoba, remember that some of the female students were taken after they finished school to work at St. Boniface Hospital in Winnipeg. One Elder worked in the annex as a nurse's aide and also in the kitchen with two of her friends. She recalls that 'when some of the girls finished school, the Father came and got us to work for the farmers in Lavinia. . . . Other girls were also taken to St. Boniface to go and work. I worked in the annex as a Nurse's Aide, I emptied bed pans and made beds every morning. I also worked in the kitchen.' Another Elder remembers being taken to St. Boniface by the priest to work at the tuberculosis sanatorium when she left school at the age of eighteen (Beaulieu 1996).

Indigenous women's domestic labor was in demand at the farms and homes of settlers in the area of the schools, and in southern Canada the schools also fed labor into urban economies as well. This is exactly what the schools aimed to do.<sup>16</sup> From the late nineteenth century, when the residential school system developed, student labor was contracted out to local people, some of whom were patrons of the schools—often this was called 'working out.' This system has been examined in the US context, where it appears to have been far more extensive. Originally founded by Captain Pratt at Carlisle Indian School in the 1890s, the 'outing system' had changed dramatically by the 1930s from placing pupils with philanthropic Christian families who wanted to teach students 'the customs of civilized life,' to supplying areas around the schools with Indian labor, which was considered cheaper and more easily controlled (Trennert 1983). These assumptions, forms of apprenticeship and contracting patterns prevailed in various parts of the US, Australia and Canada at this time (Haskins 2001, 2007, 2012; Robinson, and Aird, in this volume; Jacobs 2007; Huggins 1987–88, 1995; White 1987; Titley 1986). The outing system was discussed in the Canadian context as early as 1898 at a Conference on Indian Missions, at which Mr. Monroe, of Regina, explained that the system operated over the summer and workers sent their earnings to their parents. Monroe believed that 'a great deal of the work and of the money on the reserves was lost if the future of the children was to be on the reserves.' He continued, 'The Indians in white peoples' homes would be at least equal to white children from rescue homes.' In other versions of the system discussed, students were sent 'out' for various lengths of time from all or part of the summer to the entire year and pay ranged from nothing, to a suit of clothes.<sup>17</sup> Historian J.R. Miller argues that to the Department, outing encouraged 'acquiring increased proficiency in the English language . . . [and] the habits and ways of thought pertaining to the whites. Moreover, it kept young women isolated from their own people at an age when marriage was a possibility'

(1997: 255–57). Miller also points out the Department's ambiguous views of apprenticeship—it raised the problem of controlling the after-school time and spending money of students. This 'problem' was to continue to frame the Department's decision-making in terms of both discharge decisions and labor placement. Yet Indian agents, principals and others continued to take 'requests' for Indigenous domestic servants—often remarking that demand exceeded supply—and engaging in the placement of Indigenous women in domestic service. In fact, the Department was not only involved in the training of Indigenous domestic servants in its schools, but also in recruiting, contracting, supervising and regulating Indigenous women's domestic labor (McCallum 2008).

There was some conflict between the schools' need for student labor and the demand from local white employers for that labor. At schools which required the per capita of each student to continue their operations and did not have enough older students to maintain the schools, principals were less willing to give up the student to domestic service. But records indicate that often domestic service placement was in fact the preferred route, as opposed to continuing schooling. In a study of a domestics placement scheme in Ottawa, Canada, in the early 1940s, I found that some students were placed out of Ontario residential schools and into domestic work at Ottawa homes, hospitals and schools even before the end of the school year, suggesting that work not only far outranked in importance their education at the schools but also that the demands of white employers outranked those of schools. In conflicts, the Department consistently sided with employers; and when domestics were deemed 'disobedient' or otherwise problematic, they would be returned by the department to residential schools for further 'training.'<sup>18</sup>

While residential schooling was seen to feed directly into waged domestic service, long stays at the schools were also substantially justified on the premise that Indigenous women's education would prepare them to become 'good' wives and mothers and to take on the work themselves of 'civilizing' communities after they graduated or otherwise left the schools. This would entail prolonged education and protection at the schools and the continued separation of children from homes that were deemed unsuitable. In 1936, 'Widow Mrs. A.' wrote to the Indian Department, 'I wish to inquire of you to grant me my wish by allowing my sixteen year old daughter to leave school to come to help me as I have two little children with me and I have no other support. I have a chance to go out to work if I had her home and I know she is willing to work also and help me support us.' She explained that the family had no home, and that the daughter and mother had planned to work together to get a home. 'We are tired of roaming from place to place,' she wrote.<sup>19</sup>

Correspondence to the DIA such as that of 'Widow Mrs. A.' provides a rare glimpse into the impact of federal Indian policy at the level of family and community from the perspective of women. It was not uncommon for the children who were at residential schools to have come from struggling

families. In many cases, their parents were separated, ill or deceased, and there was no means of a reliable source of steady income. First Nations communities suffered from much higher rates of mortality from tuberculosis and other infectious diseases than the non-Aboriginal population, due to general poverty, lack of access to clean water and overcrowded living conditions. Under these circumstances, many First Nations women—especially widows or separated women—worked for wages. This suited traditional patterns in which families relied on older members for assistance in raising younger children. However First Nations have a much lower than average life expectancy and there were especially low numbers of people over the age of sixty-five in First Nations communities.

In such a situation, the presence and labor of young women would be essential. It is in this phase of life, Kim Anderson (2011: 97–125) explains in her book on life stages of Métis, Cree and Anishinaabek women in the 1930s to the 1960s, that Indigenous women took on the ‘responsibility of ensuring sustenance for the community and care for the young and old.’ She finds that after puberty, adolescent girls were seen to be part of an adult stage of life and responsible for various tasks associated with adult women. At this stage, they traditionally took on responsibilities for the care of children from childbirth upward. They also took on ceremonial and medicinal responsibilities. Young Indigenous women additionally engaged in different forms of labor including gathering, preparing, preserving and distributing food, making and repairing clothing and equipment and, as we see a move towards cash economies, waged labor. Some worked at selling furs, berries, Seneca root, rugs and baskets, work that was done in large groups or cooperatively. However, it was also common for unmarried women to take on independent full-time jobs. Studies on the legacies of the residential schools have examined the intergenerational impacts of not having access to a continued traditional education. Struggling family and community economies of the early twentieth century would have only compounded this process.

The DIA’s fear that young Native adults may ‘backslide’ outweighed its conviction that they needed continued training or placement in domestic service and appears to be the strongest justification for refusal of discharge. Instead of addressing Mrs. A’s request for her daughter to leave the school, Agent Moore described her character and home conditions (‘not the best’) in a letter to the Department. Not only had Mrs. A lost her Mothers’ Allowance (an insufficient Ontario government payment to ‘worthy’ mothers) due to immorality, he argued, and had an eleven-year-old placed at a residential school, she was also living with a man with whom she had another child. On this account, Moore argued it was best to leave her daughter at the school ‘as long as possible.’<sup>20</sup>

Scholars have argued that settler colonialism and nation building are gendered projects and demanded of women the physical, mental and emotional labor not only of bearing, raising and socializing children but also of creating and maintaining households and people, from infancy to old



age (Perry 2011; Carter 1997, 2009; Simonsen 2006). The domestic sphere and domestic labor commonly featured in rationalizations to refuse the discharge of female students for the same rationalizations. The phrase 'home conditions' was used commonly and the term seems to encompass a wide range of circumstances that included the death or separation of parents, homes lacking modern facilities, small overcrowded spaces, and unemployed heads of households.

Judgments of 'unsatisfactory' conditions were also applied to First Nations communities more generally, and the peril faced by young women in both was not ungendered. The concern about return was also informed by distinct racialized ideas of the 'natural inclinations' of First Nations people. It was felt that female pupils would leave the schools only to find 'trouble' waiting for them, or that they would be an economic or social 'liability' to reserves. This commonly seems to have been about fears of unmarried couples living together, 'illegitimate children' and the influence of irresponsible parents along with the rowdy on young adults, who had spent the majority of their lives in the highly disciplined, sheltered and regulated environment of residential schools. In these situations, it was thought best that female students receive further training in domestic service until they could be placed in 'suitable' jobs as domestic servants.

When the bill to amend sections of the Indian Act, including increasing the age of discharge to eighteen, was debated in the House of Commons in 1930, the justification seems to have merely repeated the broader justification for assimilation policy and the schools more generally; it was a way for students to 'continue to live in the atmosphere in which [they had] been brought up in the school.'<sup>21</sup> It was also framed as a safety net for sixteen-year-olds who did not have homes, families and communities waiting for them when and if they returned. It is unfortunate that the debates did not include a discussion of the frequent and persistent requests by parents for the return of their children. Superintendent of Education Russell Ferrier explained the change in the law using two cases in which the schools were 'morally obligated' to refuse parents' requests for their daughters. In one case, the department refused to discharge Kathleen from school upon repeated requests by her father because Kathleen's mother was dead and her father 'eked out an existence, begging, etc.' in a nearby city. In the other case the DIA refused to return two seventeen-year-old pupils to their mother, Mrs. C. who, Ferrier was convinced, 'wanted her daughters to join her in a life of prostitution.' While he lacked the legal right to do so, Ferrier felt a 'moral obligation to thwart the efforts of an irresponsible parent,' and felt that the DIA should grant school officials the power to keep 'such children' in school until their eighteenth birthday, at which point 'they would be better able to choose wisely for themselves.'<sup>22</sup> By Ferrier's reckoning, if the girls were returned to their mother, 'the best that would happen to them would be early marriage to Indian men or doubtful whites, who are favored by the mother and the man with whom she is living, and a consequent reversion



to reserve habits and life.' In contrast, at present the girls were studying at a nearby Collegiate and living in a Christian home 'where their evening activities are thoughtfully supervised.'<sup>23</sup>

When faced with no other option, some parents went to solicitors in order to have their children returned. A local barrister had sent a letter on behalf of Kathleen's father, for example, to the Deputy Superintendent General, requesting Kathleen's discharge.<sup>24</sup> Mrs. C. also went to a Winnipeg solicitor to enforce the age restrictions of the Indian Act. In such cases, Ferrier urged the DIA respondents to convince the solicitors that school was the best option, and to disclose all personal information collected by the DIA about the parents. The DIA did not intend to back down on such cases, even in the event that it was unsuccessful in convincing the solicitor to drop the case.<sup>25</sup> This illustrates the coercive power of colonial authorities to make decisions on behalf of Indigenous families and communities, even in the face of efforts to resist. The Department was profoundly invested in the domestic training and labor of Indigenous women and was prepared to go to great lengths to ensure that this investment paid off, once it was set in motion.

## OTHER VOICES

Struggles over age of discharge provide a sketch of colonization and domestic service in the context of residential schools in the early twentieth century. These two points of view, while dominant, do not represent the entirety of opinions about the proper place of young First Nations women in Canada. Dissenting voices were scarce—yet there were a few. Compulsory manual labor at residential schools was not free of critics who felt that it hindered academic education and overtaxed the students. In addition, some department officials agreed with parents on discharge cases; however, they did so mostly in cases where there was no room at the school for extra students. Other reasons included complaints that female students over sixteen were sullen, baneful, revengeful or rowdy, or an overall nuisance and even a demoralizing influence on younger girls. In a few other instances the case was made that discharge was in the interests of establishing good relations between First Nations people and the DIA. Only one letter suggested that detaining students under the pretenses of education was actually deceptive, and that more children than not would be better off at home.<sup>26</sup> I found no evidence of any parent or guardian requesting that their children stay past the age of sixteen at the schools, despite it being clear that many of the students did not have homes to return to when they became old enough to leave and many of those who stayed past this age had very few other choices. It is significant that for many families, especially during the Depression, residential schools were the only means of ensuring children were fed and clothed. Indeed, historian Brenda Child finds that in the United States,

Indian boarding schools had their highest enrollments during these years (Child 2013: 99).

The almost singular focus of domestic training for female students at Indian schools came under some scrutiny after World War II. In 1942, a special House of Commons Committee on Postwar Reconstruction and Reestablishment was struck to conduct several hearings to identify issues of importance that would likely face Canada following the war and solutions that reflected Canadians' postwar reality. In this period, the marked inequality of First Nations people within Canada became a matter of national concern and the Committee considered the efficacy of a segregated system of Indian education—in particular residential schools. One of the chief questioners, Dorise Nielsen (a Member of Parliament from Saskatchewan), voiced her objection to the conventional opinion that Indian girls were 'best fitted for domestic service,' stating, 'It seems to me that there is something wrong with our whole attitude towards these young girls. Why should Indian girls be more fitted for domestic service than any other type of girl? Why should we not endeavor to fit these girls . . . in the usual life of the country and to go into various forms of service?' She continued, 'Why not give them every opportunity and facility, if they are capable of absorbing it?' Nielsen's larger argument was about the importance of equal opportunity in education and employment in order that Indigenous people could be absorbed by the larger Canadian nation (quoted in Shewell 2004: 149). This view was indicative of a shift in Indian policy in the postwar years towards integration, reflected in an increasing preference for day schools over residential schools, and the integration of Indigenous children into provincial schools—a move that would encourage a grand transition from reserve life to the so-called Canadian way of life. Significantly, even in a period of integration, training for domestic service followed through as a mainstay of curriculum for Indigenous female students and domestic service remained a key area of employment for Indigenous women.

## CONCLUSION

Indigenous scholars argue that Indigenous women are doubly disadvantaged in societies that are colonial and patriarchal (Anderson 2000; Smith 2005; Green 2007; Sunseri 2011; Huhndorf and Suzack 2010). Yet the irony is that while Indigenous women were assigned a low status in these societies, their place within them was vitally important. This becomes very clear in the age of discharge disputes of the early twentieth century. The labor of young Indigenous women was crucial to the economies of colonization. The physical operation of residential schools was fully dependent on the labor of female students who sewed uniforms, cooked, cleaned, laundered and gardened. This training was to prepare them for jobs as domestics outside of the schools, where they were greatly in demand by surrounding

communities. At the same time, Indigenous communities were struggling in the early twentieth century, and this was compounded by the absence of young women who were refused discharge from residential schools. Letters from parents requesting the return of daughters illustrate their centrality to family economies, and the roles young women would have undertaken there. These included helping out with young children while mothers worked, helping out with caring for the sick and also engaging in paid labor to contribute to family economies. In Canada, education for and employment in domestic service were to play a key role in the colonization of Indigenous people. Efforts to displace and also replace domestic labor reflect the gendered and racialized nature of colonial projects as well as the central place of Indigenous women within our history.

## NOTES

1. Discharge forms for students in the schools had columns for 'Trade or Industry Taught and Proficiency in it': 'Domestic' was all that was put in the column for many of the female students who were discharged. In 'Reasons for discharge' columns, there included the following: reached age limit, asked for by mother, sent to sanatorium, run away, incorrigible, parents request for them, and to go to day school.
2. Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), Record Group 10—Indian Affairs (hereafter RG 10), volume 7184, file 1/25-1-5-7 pt. 1, letter to the Secretary J.D. McLean from W.M. Graham, Indian Commissioner, February 19, 1926.
3. LAC, RG 10, volume 7184, file 1/25-1-5-7 pt. 1, letter to the Secretary from Indian Agent at Gleichen, Alberta, February 22, 1929.
4. LAC, RG 10, volume 6209, file 468-10 pt. 1, letter from Medical Superintendent Caradoc to the Secretary, Indian Affairs Branch, March 12, 1937.
5. The Statutes of Canada, 43 V, c28, s138.2, 1886.
6. The Statutes of Canada, 10-11 George V, c50, s10, 1920.
7. The Statutes of Canada, 20-21 George V, c25, s10, 1930.
8. The Statutes of Canada, 10-11 George V, c50, s10.2 and s10.3, 1920. By the 1951 Act, the time allowed for the third exemption was no less than six weeks.
9. LAC, RG 10, volume 6209, file 468-10 pt. 1, letter from Medical Superintendent Caradoc to Secretary, Indian Affairs Branch, March 12, 1937.
10. LAC, RG 10, volume 7184, file 1/25-1-5-7 pt. 1, letter from Russell T. Ferrier, Superintendent of Indian Education, to C.A. Stevenson, Indian Agent Selkirk, Manitoba, June 30, 1927.
11. LAC, RG 10, volume 6209, file 468-10 pt. 1, letter to Indian Department from Mrs. Louisa Williams, August 13, 1937.
12. LAC, RG 10, volume 6209, file 468-10 pt. 1, letter to Philip Phelan from Oliver Strapp, September 25, 1937.
13. LAC, RG 10, volume 7184, file 1/25-1-5-7 pt. 1, letter from Principal Pitts, Indian Residential School, Alberni, October 4, 1929.
14. LAC, RG 10, volume 6258, file 576-10 pt. 9, letter to the Secretary, Department of Indian Affairs, from J.A. Doyle, Principal of Brandon Indian Residential School, May 27, 1936.

15. LAC, RG 10, volume 6258, file 576-10 pt. 9, letter to J.A. Doyle from J.D. Sutherland, June 16, 1936.
16. LAC, RG 10, volume 6205, file 468-1 pt. 2, letter to Department from Principal McVitty, Mount Elgin Institute, May 31, 1929, and volume 6205, file 468-1 pt. 1, letter to Rev. Dr. Sutherland, Muncee, The Institute, from Principal McVitty, Mount Elgin Institute, December 10, 1908.
17. 'Indian Missions: Closing of the Conference in St. Andrews Church,' *Manitoba Morning Free Press*, Saturday, November 7, 1898, 5.
18. See for example two conflicts over vacation time: LAC, RG 10, volume 3199, File 504, 178-5, letter to Mr. Morris from C.A. Primeau, June 11, 1943, and letter to C.A. Primeau from R.A. Hoey, June 14, 1943.
19. LAC, RG 10, volume 6209, file 468-10 pt. 1, letter to Indian Department from Mrs. Ethel Abram, Southwold, Ontario/Oneida, September 16, 1936. Original emphasis.
20. LAC, RG 10, volume 6209, file 468-10 pt. 1, letter to secretary, Indian Affairs Branch, from A.D. Moore, Indian Agent, September 27, 1937.
21. Debates of the House of Commons, Dominion of Canada Session 1930 Volume 1, March 31, 1930, 1108.
22. LAC, RG 10, volume 7184, file 1/25-1-5-7 pt. 1, memorandum from Superintendent of Education Russell Ferrier, February 16, 1929.
23. LAC, RG 10, volume 7184, file 1/25-1-5-7 pt. 1, letter to Mr. Bunn, Inspector of Indian Agencies, Winnipeg, from Russell T. Ferrier, Superintendent of Indian Education, December 26, 1924.
24. LAC, RG 10, volume 7184, file 1/25-1-5-7 pt. 1, letter to Mr. Sweet, Barrister, Brantford from Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent General, February 5, 1927.
25. LAC, RG 10, volume 7184, file 1/25-1-5-7 pt. 1, letter to Mr. Bunn, Inspector of Indian Agencies, Winnipeg, from Russell T. Ferrier, Superintendent of Indian Education December 26, 1924.
26. LAC, RG 10, volume 7184, file 1/25-1-5-7 pt. 1, letter to Secretary Indian Affairs J.D. McLean from W.M. Graham, Indian Commissioner, March 3, 1926.

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